MOOSWA & OTHERS OF THE BOUNDARIES

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MOOSWA & OTHERS OF THE BOUNDARIES ***

Produced by Al Haines.

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Cover

MOOSWA & OTHERS

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"WELL, LET ME SEE," CONTINUED BLACK FOX, "HERE YE HAVE ALL ASSEMBLED; FOR FORM'S SAKE I WILL CALL YOUR NAMES."

OF THE BOUNDARIES

By W. A. FRASER

Illustrated by ARTHUR HEMING

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Illustrations

From drawings by Arthur Heming

"Well, let me see," continued Black Fox, "here Ye have all assembled; for form's sake I will call your names" . . . Frontispiece

"So I lay still, pretending to be asleep"

"The ball struck me in the shoulder, and made me furious with rage"

"Wuf!" sniffed Muskwa, gently. "Our Man burns the stink-weed in his mouth"

"Cat," answered François; "dat's Mister Lynk"

Rof was going with so much speed, ... that he couldn't gather for a spring

They were a funny-looking party

"Holy Mudder, dis time sabe François"

"I go for pull out now, Boy"

"It's terrible!" Mooswa blurted out

"Poor old Chap!"

In three days they arrived at The Landing

Introduction

This simple romance of a simple people, the furred dwellers of the Northern forests, came to me from time to time during the six seasons I spent on the Athabasca and Saskatchewan Rivers in the far North-West of Canada.

Long evenings have passed pleasantly, swiftly, as sitting over a smouldering camp-fire I have listened to famous Trappers as they spoke with enthusiastic vividness of the most fascinating life in the world,–the fur-winner's calling.

If the incidents and tales in this book fail of interest the fault is mine, for, coming from their lips, they pleased as did the song of the Minstrel in the heroic past.

Several of the little tales are absolutely true. Black Fox was trapped as here described, by a Half-breed, Johnnie Groat, who was with me for a season.

Carcajou has raided, not one, but many shacks through the chimney, as fifty Trappers in the North-West could be brought to testify. The trapping of this clever little animal by means of a hollow stump, all other schemes having failed, was an actual occurrence. It is a well known fact that many a Trapper has had to abandon his "marten road" and move to another locality when Carcajou has set up to drive him out.

Mooswa is still plentiful in the forests of the Athabasca, and is the embodiment of dignity among animals.

There is no living thing more characteristic of the Northern land than Whisky-Jack, the Jay. Wherever a traveller stops, on plain or in forest, and uncovers food, there will be one or two of these saucy, thieving birds. Where they nest, or how, is much of a mystery. I never met but one man who claimed to have found Jack's nest, and this man, a Trapper, was of rather an imaginative turn of mind.

The Rabbit of that land is really a hare, never burrowing, but living quite in the open. As told in the story they go on multiplying at a tremendous rate for six years; the seventh, a plague carries a great number of them off, and very few are seen for the next couple of years. The supply of fur depends almost entirely upon the rabbit–he is the food reserve for the other forest dwellers.

Blue Wolf is also an actuality. Once in a while one of the gray wolves grows larger than his fellows, and wears a rich blue-gray coat. I have one of these pelts in my house now–they are very rare, and are known to the Traders and Trappers as Blue Wolf.

Perhaps this story is too simple, too light, too prolific of natural history, too something or other–I don't know; I have but tried to tell the things that appeared very fascinating to me under the giant spruce and the white-barked poplars, with the dark-faced Indians and open-handed white Trappers sitting about a spirit-soothing camp-fire.

THE DWELLERS OF THE BOUNDARIES AND THEIR NAMES IN THE CREE INDIAN LANGUAGE

MOOSWA, *the Moose.* Protector of The Boy.

MUSKWA, *the Bear.*

BLACK FOX, *King of the Boundaries.*

THE RED WIDOW, *Black Fox's Mother.*

CROSS-STRIPES, *Black Fox's Baby Brother.*

ROF, *the Blue Wolf.* Leader of the Gray Wolf Pack.

CARCAJOU, *the Wolverine.* Lieutenant to Black King, and known as the "Devil of the Woods."

PISEW, *the Lynx.* Possessed of a cat-like treachery.

UMISK, *the Beaver.* Known for his honest industry.

WAPOOS, *the Rabbit* (really a Hare). The meat food for Man and Beast in the Boundaries.

WAPISTAN, *the Marten.* With fur like the Sable.

NEKIK, *the Otter.* An eater of Fish.

SAKWASEW, *the Mink.* Would sell his Mother for a Fish.

WUCHUSK, *the Muskrat.* A houseless vagabond who admired Umisk, the Beaver.

SIKAK, *the Skunk.* A chap to be avoided, and who broke up the party at Nekik's slide.

WENUSK, *the Badger.*

WUCHAK, *the Fisher.*

WHISKY-JACK, *the Canada Jay.* A sharp-tongued Gossip.

COUGAR, EAGLE, BUFFALO, ANT, and CARIBOU.

WIE-SAH-KE-CHACK. Legendary God of the Indians, who could change himself into an animal at will.

FRANÇOIS, *French Half-breed Trapper.*

NICHEMOUS, *Half-breed hunter who tried to kill Muskwa.*

TRAPPERS, HALF-BREEDS, and TRAIN DOGS.

ROD, *The Boy.* Son of Donald MacGregor, formerly Factor to Hudson's Bay Company at Fort Resolution.

When Rod was a little chap, Mooswa had been brought into Fort Resolution as a calf, his mother having been killed, and they became playmates. Then MacGregor was moved to Edmonton, and Rod was brought up in civilization until he was fourteen, when he got permission to go back to the Athabasca for a Winter's trapping with François, who was an old servant of the Factor's. This story is of that Winter. Mooswa had been turned loose in the forest by Factor MacGregor when leaving the Fort.

THE BOUNDARIES. The great Spruce forests and Muskeg lands lying between the Saskatchewan River, the Arctic Ocean, and the Rocky Mountains–being the home of the fur-bearing animals.

Mooswa
And Others of the Boundaries

CHOOSING THE KING

The short, hot Summer, with its long-drawn-out days full of coaxing sunshine, had ripened Nature's harvest of purple-belled pea-vine, and yellow-blossomed gaillardia, and tall straight-growing moose weed; had turned the heart-shaped leaves of the poplars into new sovereigns that fell with softened clink from the branches to earth, waiting for its brilliant mantle–a fairy mantle all splashed blood-red by crimson maple woven in a woof of tawny bunch-grass and lace-fronded fern.

Oh, but it was beautiful! that land of the Boundaries, where Black Fox was King; and which stretched from the Saskatchewan to where the Peace first bounded in splashing leaps from the boulder-lined foothills of the Rockies; all beautiful, spruce-forested, and muskeg-dotted–the soft muskegs knee deep under a moss carpet of silver and green.

The Saskatoons, big brother to the Huckleberry, were drying on the bush where they had ripened; the Raspberries had grown red in their time and gladdened the heart of Muskwa, the Bear; the Currants clustered like strings of black

pearls in the cool beds of lazy streams, where pin-tailed Grouse, and Pheasant in big, red cravat, strutted and crouked in this glorious feeding-ground so like a miniature vineyard; the Cranberries nestled shyly in the moss; and the Wolf and Willow-berries gleamed like tiny white stars along the banks of the swift-running, emerald-green Saskatchewan and Athabasca. All this was in the heritage land of Black Fox, and Muskwa, and Mooswa.

It was at this time, in the full Autumn, that Whisky-Jack flew North and South, and East and West, and called to a meeting the Dwellers that were in the Boundaries. This was for the choosing of their King, a yearly observance, and for the settling of other matters.

When they had gathered, Black Fox greeted the Animals:–

"Good Year to you, Subjects, and much eating, each unto his own way of life!"

Whisky-Jack preened his mischievous head, ruffled his blue-gray feathers, broke into the harsh, cackling laugh of the Jay, and sneered, "Eating! always of eating; and never a more beautiful song to you, or–"

"Less thieving to you, eh, Mister Jay," growled Muskwa. "You who come by your eating easily have it not so heavily on your mind as we Toilers."

"Well, let me see," continued Black Fox, with reflective dignity, "here Ye have all assembled; for form's sake I will call your names."

From Mooswa to Wapoos each one of the Dwellers as his name was spoken stepped forward in the circle and saluted the King.

"Jack has been a faithful messenger," said Black King; "but where are Cougar, and Buffalo, and Eagle?"

"They had notice, thank you, Majesty, for your praise. Cougar says the mountain is his King, and that he wouldn't trust himself among a lot of Plain Dwellers."

"He's a Highway Robber and an Outlaw, anyway, so it doesn't matter," asserted Carcajou.

"You wouldn't talk that way if he were at your throat, my fat little Friend," lisped Whisky-Jack. "Buffalo is afraid of Man, and won't come; nearly all his brothers have been killed off, and he is hiding in the Spruce woods near Athabasca Lake."

"I saw a herd of them last Summer," declared Mooswa; "fine big fellows they have grown to be, too. Their hair is longer, and blacker, and curlier than it was when they were on the Plains. There's no more than fifty of them left alive in all the North woods; it's awful to think of how they were slaughtered. That's why I stick to the Timber Boundaries."

"Eagle won't come, Your Majesty, because Jay's chatter makes his head ache," declared Carcajou.

”Blame me,” cried Whisky-Jack, ”if anybody doesn’t turn up at the meeting–say it’s my fault; I don’t mind.”

”You know why we meet as usual?” queried Black Fox, placing his big white-tipped brush affectedly about his feet.

”That they do,” piped Whisky-Jack; ”it’s because they’re afraid of losing their hides. I’m not–nobody tries to rob me.”

”Worthless Gabbler!” growled Muskwa.

”Jack is right,” declared Black Fox; ”if we do not help each other with the things we have learned, our warm coats will soon be on the shoulders of the White Men’s Wives.”

”Is that why the Men are always chasing us?” asked Beaver, turning his sharp-pointed head with the little bead eyes toward the King.

”Not in your case,” snapped Whisky-Jack, ”for they eat you, old Fat Tail. I heard the two White Men who camped on our river last Winter say that your Brother, whom they caught when they raided your little round lodge, tasted like beefsteak, whatever that is.–He, he! And François the Guide ate his tail and said it was equal to fat bacon.”

”Unthinking Wretch!” cried Umisk angrily, bringing his broad tail down on a stone like the crack of a pistol.

”I picked his bones,” taunted the Jay; ”he was dead, and cooked too, so it didn’t matter.”

”Cannibal!” grunted Bear.

”They eat you also, Muskwa; only when they’re very hungry though,–they say your flesh is like bad pork, strong and tough.”

Black Fox interrupted the discord. ”Comrades,” he pleaded, ”don’t mind Jack; he’s only a Jay, and you know what chatterers they are. He means well–does he not tell us when the Trappers are coming, and where the Traps are?”

”Yes, and steal the Bait so you won’t get caught,” added Jay. ”Oh, I am good–I help you. You’re a lot of crawling fools–all but the King. You can run, and fight, but you don’t know things. That’s because you don’t associate with Man, and sit in his camp as I do.”

”I’ve been in his camp,” asserted Carcajou, picking up a small stone slyly to shy at Jack.

”Not when he was home,” retorted the Jay; ”you sneaked in to steal when he was away.”

”Stop!” commanded the King, angrily. ”Your chatter spoils everything, do stop!”

Whisky-Jack spread his feathers till he looked like a woollen ball, and subsided.

”This is the end of the year,” continued Black Fox, ”and the great question

is, are you satisfied with the rule–is it good?"

Wolverine spoke: "I have been Lieutenant to the Black King for four years–I am satisfied. When our enemies, the Trappers, have tried to catch us by new wiles His Majesty has told us how to escape."

"Did he, always?" demanded the Bird. "Who knew of the little White Powder that François put in the Meat–the White Medicine Powder he had in a bottle? Neither you, Carcajou, nor Black King, nor any one tasted that–did you? Even now you do not know the name of it; but I can tell you–it's strychnine. Ha, ha! but that was funny. They put it out, and I, Whisky-Jack, whom you call a Tramp, told you. I, Jack the Gabbler, flew till my wings were tired warning you to beware."

"You might have saved yourself the trouble," retorted Wolverine; "Black King would have found it with his nose. Can he not tell even if any Man has touched the Meat that is always a Bait?"

"Stupid!" exclaimed Jack; "do you think the Men are such fools? They handle not the Bait which is put in the Traps–they know that all the brains you chaps have are in your noses. Catch François, the Half-breed, doing that; he's too clever. He cuts it with a long knife, and handles it with a stick. The little White Powder that is the essence of death is put in a hole in the Meat. I know; I've seen them at it. Haven't their Train-Dogs noses also–and didn't two of them that time eat the Bait, and die before they had travelled the length of a Rabbit-run. I saw them–they grew stiff and quiet, like the White Man who fell in the snow last Winter when he was lost. But I'm satisfied with Black Fox; and you can be his Lieutenant–I don't care."

"Yes," continued Carcajou, "who among us is more fitted to be King? Muskwa is strong, and big, and brave; but soon he will go into his house, and sleep until Spring. What would become of us with no King for months?"

"Yes, I'm sleepy," answered Bear–"and tired. I've tramped up and down the banks of the river eating white Buffalo-berries and red Cranberries until I'm weary. They are so small, and I am so big; it keeps me busy all day."

"You've got stout on it," chuckled Jack. "I wish I could get fat."

"You talk too much, and fret yourself to death over other people's business," growled Bear. "You're a meddling Tramp."

"Muskwa," said Mink, "there are bushels and bushels of big, juicy, Black Currants up in the Muskeg, near the creek I fish in–I wish I could eat them. Swimming, swimming all day after little frightened Fish, that are getting so cunning. Why, they hide under sticks, and get up in shallow water among the stones, so that I can hardly see them. It must be pleasant to sit up on your quarters, nice and dry, pull down the bushes and eat great, juicy Berries. I wish I lived on fruit."

"No you don't," snarled Jay; "you'd sell your Mother for a fish."

”If you’re quite through wrangling,” interrupted Wolverine, ”I’ll go on talking about the King. Who is better suited than Black Fox? Is it Mooswa? He would make a very magnificent-looking King. See his great horns. He would protect us–just now; but do you not know that in the Spring they will drop off, and our Comrade will be like a Man without hands all Summer. Why, even his own Wife won’t look at him while he is in that condition. Then the young horns come out soft and pulpy, all covered with velvet, and until they get hard again are tender, and he’s afraid to strike anything with them. You see, we must have somebody that is King all the year round. Why, Mooswa couldn’t tell us about the Bait; he can’t put his nose to the ground; he can’t even eat grass, because of his short neck.”

”I wish I could,” sighed the Moose. ”I get tired of the purple-headed Mooseweed, and the leaves and twigs. The young grass looks so sweet and fresh. But Carcajou is right; I was made this way–I don’t know why, though.”

”No, you weren’t!” objected Whisky-Jack; ”you’re such a lordly chap when you get your horns in good order, and have gone around so much with that big nose stuck up in the air, that you’ve just got into that shape–He, he! I’ve seen Men like you. The Hudson’s Bay Factor, at Slave Lake, is just your sort. Bah! I don’t want you for a King.”

The Bull Moose waved his tasselled beard back and forth angrily, and stamped a sharp, powerful fore-foot on the ground like a trip-hammer.

Black Fox interfered again. ”Why do you make everybody angry, you silly Bird?” he said to the Jay. ”Do you learn this bitter talk from listening to your Men friends while you are waiting for their scraps?”

”Perhaps so; I learn many things from them, and you learn from me. But go on, Bully Carcajou. Tell us all why we’re not fit to be Kings. Perhaps Rof, there, would like to hear of his failings.”

”I don’t want to be King,” growled Rof, the big Blue Wolf, surlily.

”No, your manners are against you,” sneered Jack; ”you’d do better as executioner.”

”Well,” commenced Carcajou, taking up the challenge, ”to tell you the truth, we’re all just a little afraid of Rof. We don’t want a despotic Ruler if we can help it. I don’t wish to hurt his feelings, but when Blue Wolf got hungry his subjects might suffer.”

”I don’t want him for King,” piped Mink; ”his jaws are too strong and his legs too long.”

”Oh, I couldn’t stay here,” declared Blue Wolf, ”and manage things for you fellows. Next month I’m going away down below Grand Rapids. My Brother has been hunting there with a Pack of twenty good fellows, and says the Rabbits are so thick that he’s actually getting fat;” and Wolf licked his steel jaws with a

hungry movement that made them all shudder. His big lolling tongue looked like a firebrand.

"You needn't fret," squeaked Jay; "we don't want you. We don't want a rowdy Ruler. I saw you fighting with the Train Dogs over at Wapiscaw last Winter. You're as disgraceful as any domestic cur."

"Now, Pisew–" began Carcajou.

As he mentioned the Lynx's name, a smile went round the meeting. Whisky-Jack took a fit of chuckling laughter, until he fell off his perch. This made him cranky in an instant. "Of all the silly Sneaks!" he exclaimed scornfully, as he fluttered up on a small Jack-pine, and stuck out his ruffled breast. "That Spear-eared Creature for King! Oh, my! Oh, my! that's too rich! He'd have you all catching Rabbits for him to eat. Kings are great gourmands, I know, but they don't eat Field Mice, and Frogs, and Snails, and trash of that sort–not raw, anyway."

Carcajou proceeded more gravely with his objection. "As I said before, this is purely a matter of business with us; and anything I say must not be taken as a personal affront."

"Of course not, of course not," interrupted Jack. "Go on with your candid observations, Hump-back."

"We all know our Friend's weakness for perfume," continued Wolverine.

"Do you call Castoreum a perfume?" questioned Whisky-Jack. "It's a vile, diabolical stink–that's what it is. Why, the Trappers won't keep it in their Shacks–it smells so bad; they bury it outside. Nobody but a gaunt, brainless creature, like the Cat there, would risk his neck for a whiff of that horrible-smelling stuff."

"Order!" commanded Black King; "you get so personal, Jack. You know that our Comrade, Beaver, furnishes the Castoreum, don't you?"

"Yes, I know; and he ought to be ashamed of it."

"It's not my fault," declared Umisk; "your friends, the cruel Trappers, don't get it from us till we're dead."

"Well, never mind about that," objected Carcajou. "We know, and the Trappers know, that Lynx is the easiest caught of all our fellows; if he were our King they'd snare him in a week–then we'd be without a Ruler. We must have some one that not only can take care of us, but of himself too."

"Pisew can't do that–he can't take care of his own family," twittered Jay. "His big furry feet make a trail in the snow like Panther's, and then when you come up to him, he's just a great starved Cat, with less brains than a Tadpole."

Carcajou suddenly reared on his hind quarters and let fly the stone with his short, strong, right arm at the Bird. "Evil Chatterer!" he exclaimed angrily, "you are always making mischief."

Jack hopped nimbly to one side, cocked his saucy silvered head downward, and piped: ”Proceed with the meeting; the Prince of all Mischief-makers, Carcajou, the Devil of the Woods, lectures us on morality.”

”Yes, let us proceed with the discussion,” commanded Black Fox.

”Brothers,” said the Moose, in a voice that was strangely plaintive, coming from such a big, deep throat, ”I am satisfied with Black Fox for King; but if anything were to happen requiring us to choose another, one of almost equal wisdom, I should like to nominate Beaver. We know that when the world was destroyed by the great flood, and there was nothing but water, that Umisk took a little mud, made it into a ball with his handy tail, and the ball grew, and they built it up until it became dry land again. Wiesahkechack has told us all about that. I have travelled from the Athabasca across Peace River, and up to the foothills of the big mountains, to the head-waters of the Smoky, and have seen much of Brother Umisk’s clever work, and careful, cautious way of life. I never heard any one say a word against his honesty.”

”That’s something,” interrupted Jay; ”that’s more than can be said for many of us.”

The big melancholy eyes of the Moose simply blinked solemnly, and he proceeded: ”Brother Umisk has constructed dams across streams, and turned miles of forest into rich, moist Muskeg, where the loveliest long grasses grow–most delicious eating. These dams are like the great hard roads you have seen the White Men cut through our country to pull their stupid carts over; I can cross the softest Muskeg on one and my sharp hoofs hardly bury to the fetlock. Is that not work worthy of an Animal King? And he has more forethought, more care for the Winter, than any of us. Some of you have seen his stock of food.”

”I have,” eagerly interrupted Nekik, the Otter.

”And I,” said Fisher.

”I too, Mooswa,” cried Mink.

”I have seen it,” quoth Muskrat; ”it’s just beautiful!”

”You tell them about Umisk’s food supply, Brother Muskrat,” commanded the Moose. ”I can’t dive under the water like you and see it ready stored, but I have observed the trees cut down by his chisel-teeth.”

”You make me blush,” remonstrated Beaver, modestly.

”Beautiful White Poplar trees,” went on Mooswa; ”and always cut so they fall just on the edge of the stream. Is that not clever for one of us? Man can’t do it every time.”

”Trowel Tail only cuts the leaning trees–that’s why!” explained Whisky-Jack.

Mooswa was too haughty to notice the interruption, but continued his laudation of Beaver’s cunning work.

”Then our Brother Umisk cuts the Poplar into pieces the length of my leg; and, while I think of it, I’d like to ask him why he leaves on the end of each stick a piece like the handle of a rolling-pin.”

”What’s a rolling-pin?” gasped Jay.

”Something the Cook throws at your head when you’re trying to steal his dinner,” interjected Carcajou.

Lynx laughed maliciously at this thrust. ”Isn’t Wolverine a witty chap?” he said, fawningly, to Blue Wolf.

”I know what that cunning little end is for,” declared Muskrat; ”I’ll tell you what Beaver does with the sticks under water, and then you’ll understand.”

Black King yawned as though all this bored him. ”He doesn’t like to hear his rival praised,” sneered Whisky-Jack; ”it makes him sleepy.”

”Well,” continued Wuchusk, ”Beaver floats the Poplar down to his pond, to a little place just up stream from his lodge, with a nice, soft bottom. There he dives swiftly with each piece, and the small round end you speak of, Mooswa, sticks in the mud, see? Oh, it is clever; I wish I could do it,–but I can’t. I have to rummage around all Winter for my dinner. All the sticks stand there close together on end; the ice forms on top of the water, and nobody can see them. When Umisk wants his dinner, he swims up the pond, selects a nice, fat, juicy Poplar, pulls it out of the mud, floats it in the front door of his pretty, round-roofed lodge, strips off the rough covering, and eats the white, mealy inner-bark. It’s delicious! No wonder Beaver is fat.”

”I should think it would be indigestible,” said Lynx. ”But isn’t Umisk kind to his family–dear little Chap!”

”Must be hard on the teeth,” remarked Mink. ”I find fishbones tough enough.”

”Oh, it’s just lovely!” sighed Beaver. ”I like it.”

”What do you do with the logs after you’ve eaten the crust?” asked Black King, pretending to be interested.

”Float them down against the dam,” answered Beaver. ”They come in handy for repairing breaks.”

”What breaks the dam?” mumbled Blue Wolf, gruffly.

”I know,” screamed Jay; ”the Trappers. I saw François knock a hole in one last Winter. That’s how he caught your cousins, Umisk, when they rushed to fix the break.”

”How do you know when it’s damaged, Beaver?” queried Mooswa. ”Supposing it was done when you were asleep–you don’t make your bed in the water, I suppose.”

”No, we have a nice, dry shelf all around on the inside of the lodge, just above–we call it the second-story; but we keep our tails in the water always, so

as soon as it commences to lower we feel it, you know."

"That is wise," gravely assented Mooswa. "Have I not said that Umisk is almost as clever as our King?"

"He may be," chirruped Jay; "but François never caught the Black King, and he catches many Beaver. Last winter he took out a Pack of their thick, brown coats, and I heard him say there were fifty pelts in it."

"That's just it," concurred Carcajou. "I admire Umisk as much as anybody. He's an honest, hard-working little chap, and looks after his family and relations better than any of us; but if there was any trouble on we couldn't consult him, for at the first crack of a Firestick, or bark of a Train Dog, he's down under the water, and either hidden away in his lodge, or in one of the many hiding-holes he has dug in the banks for just such emergencies. We must have some one who can get about and warn us all."

"I object to him because he's got Fleas," declared Jay, solemnly.

"Fleas!" a chorus of voices exclaimed in indignant protest.

The Coyote, who had been digging viciously at the back of his ear with a sharp-clawed foot, dropped his leg, got up, and stretched himself, with a yawn, hoping that nobody had observed his petulant scratching.

"That's silly!" declared Mooswa. "A chap that lives under the water have Fleas?"

"Is it?" piped Whisky-Jack. "What's his thick fur coat, with the strong, black guard-hairs for? Do you suppose that doesn't keep his hide dry? If one of you land-dwellers were out in a stiff shower you'd be wet to the skin; but he won't, though he stay under water a month. If he hasn't got Fleas, what is that double nail on his left hind-foot for?"

"Perhaps he hasn't got a split-nail," ventured Fisher–"I haven't."

"Nor I!" declared Mink.

"My nails are all single!" asserted Muskrat.

"Look for yourselves if you don't believe me," commanded Jack. "If he hasn't got it, I'll take back what I said, and you can make him King if you wish."

This made Black Fox nervous. "Will you show our Comrades your toes, please?" he commanded Beaver, with great politeness.

Umisk held up his foot deprecatingly. There sure enough, on the second toe, was a long, black, double claw, like a tiny pincers. "What did I tell you?" shrieked Jack. "He can pin a Flea with that as easily as Mink seizes a wriggling Trout. He's got half-a-dozen different kinds of Fleas, has Umisk. I won't have a King who is little better than a bug-nursery. A King must be above that sort of thing."

"This is all nonsense," exclaimed Carcajou angrily, for he had fleas himself; "it's got nothing to do with the matter. Umisk has to live under the ice nearly

all Winter, and would be of no more service to us than Muskwa–that's the real objection."

"My!" cried Beaver, patting the ground irritably with his trowel-tail, "one really never knows just how vile he is till he gets running for office. Besides, I don't want to be King–I'm too busy. Perhaps sometime when I was here governing the Council, François, or another enemy, would break my dam and murder the whole family; besides, it's too dusty out here–I like the nice, clean water. My feet get sore walking on the land."

"Oh, he doesn't want to be King!" declared Jay, ironically. "Next! next! Who else is there, Frog-legged Carcajou?"

"Well, there's Muskrat," suggested Lynx; "I like him."

"Yes, to eat!" interrupted Whisky-Jack. "If Wuchusk were King, we'd come home some day and find that he'd been eaten by one of his own subjects–by the sneaking Lynx–'Slink' it should be."

"You shouldn't say that," declared Black Fox; "because you're our Mail Carrier you shouldn't take so many liberties."

"I'm only telling the truth. It has always been the custom at these meetings for each one to speak just what he thought, and no hard feelings afterward."

Carcajou pulled his long, curved claws through his whiskers reflectively. "What's the use of wrangling like this–we're as silly as a lot of Men. Last Winter when I was down at Grand Rapids I sat up on the roof of a Shack listening to those two-legged creatures squabbling. They were all arguing fiercely about the different ways of getting to Heaven. According to each one he was on the right road, and the rest were all wrong. Fresh Meat! but it was stupid; for I gathered from what they said that the one way to get there was to be good; only each had a different way."

"What place did you say?" queried the Jay.

"Grand Rapids."

"No, no! the place they all wanted to go to."

"Heaven."

"Where's that?"

"I don't know, and you needn't bother; for the Men said it was a place for the good, only."

Beaver's fat sides fairly shook as he chuckled delightedly over the snub Carcajou had given Jack.

"Ha, ha!" roared Bear; "Sweet Berries! but Humpback is too many for you, Birdie," and the woods echoed with his laughter.

"Rats!" screamed the Jay; "that's the subject under discussion. Our friend wanders from his theme trying to be personal."

"Oh, nobody's personal here," sighed Lynx. "I'm a 'Slink,' but that doesn't

count."

"Yes, talking of Rats," recommenced Carcajou, "like Lynx, I admire our busy little Brother, Beaver, though I never ate one in my life–"

"Pisew did!" chirruped the bird-voice from over their heads.

"Though I never ate one," solemnly repeated Wolverine; "but if Umisk won't do for King, there is no use discussing Wuchusk's chances. He has all Trowel Tail's failings, without his great wisdom, and even can't build a decent house, though he lives in one. Half the time he hasn't anything to eat for his family; you'll see him skirmishing about Winter or Summer, eating Roots, or, like our friends Mink and Otter, chasing Fish. Anyway, I get tired of that horrible odour of musk always. His house smells as bad as a Trapper's Shack with piles of fur in it–I hate people who use musk, it shows bad taste; and to carry a little bag of it around with one all the time–it's detestable!"

"You should take a trip to the Barren Lands, my fastidious friend, as I did once," interposed Mooswa, "and get a whiff of the Musk Ox. Much Fodder! it turned my stomach."

"You took too much of it, old Blubbernose," yelled Jay, fiendishly; "Wolverine hasn't got a nose like the head of a Sturgeon Fish. Anyway, you're out of it, Mister Rat; if the Lieutenant says you're not fit for King, why you're not–I must say I'm glad of it."

"There are still the two cousins, Otter, and Mink," said Carcajou.

"Fish Thieves–both of them," declared Whisky-Jack. "So is Fisher, only he hasn't nerve to go in the water after Fish; he waits till Man catches and dries them, then robs the cache. That's why they call him Fisher–they should name him Fish-stealer."

"Look here, Jack," retorted Wolverine, "last Winter I heard François say that you stole even his soap."

"I thought it was butter," chuckled Jay–"it made me horribly sick. But their butter was so bad, I thought the soap was an extra good pat of it."

"I may say," continued Carcajou, "that these two cousins, Otter and Mink, like Muskrat, have too limited a knowledge for either to be Chief of the Boundaries. While they know all about streams and water powers, they'd be lost on land. Why, in deep snow, Nekik with his short, little legs makes a track as though somebody had pulled a log along–that wouldn't do."

"I don't want to be King!" declared Otter.

"Nor I!" added Mink.

"And we don't want you–so that settles it; all agreed!" cried Whisky-Jack, gleefully. "Nothing like having peace and harmony in the meeting. It always comes to the same thing: people's names are put up, they're blackguarded and abused, and in the end nobody's fit for the billet but Black Fox; and Carcajou, of

course, is his Lieutenant."

"We have now considered everybody's claims," began Carcajou–

"You've modestly forgotten yourself," interrupted Whisky-Jack. "You'd make a fine, fat, portly Ruler."

"No, I withdraw in favour of Black Fox, and we won't even mention your name. Black Fox has been a good King; he has saved many of us from a Trap; besides, he wears the Royal Robe. Look at him! his Mother and all his Brothers and Sisters are red, except Stripes, the Baby, who is a Cross; does that not show that he has been selected for royal honours? Among ourselves each one is like his Brother–there is little difference. The Minks are alike, the Otter are alike, the Wolves are alike–all are alike; except, of course, that one may be a little larger or a little darker than the other. Look at the King's magnificent Robe–blacker than Fisher's coat; and the silver tip of the white guard-hairs make it more beautiful than any of our jackets."

"It's just lovely!" purred Pisew, with a fine sycophantic touch.

"I'm glad I haven't a coat like that," sang out Jay; "His Majesty will be assassinated some day for it. Do you fellows know what he's worth to the Trappers–do any of you know your market value? I thought not–let me tell you."

"For the sake of a mild Winter, don't–not just now," pleaded Carcajou. "Let us settle this business of the King first, then you can all spin yarns."

"Yes, we're wasting time," declared Umisk. "I've got work to do on my house, so let us select a Chief, by all means. There's Coyote, and Wapoos, and Sikak the Skunk, who have not yet been mentioned." But each of these, dreading Jack's sharp tongue, hastily asserted they were not in the campaign as candidates.

"Well, then," asked Carcajou, "are you all agreed to have Black Fox as Leader until the fulness of another year?"

"I'm satisfied!" said Bear, gruffly.

"It's an honour to have him," ventured Pisew the Lynx.

"He's a good enough King," declared Nekik the Otter.

"I'm agreed!" exclaimed Beaver; "I want to get home to my work."

"Long live the King!" barked Blue Wolf.

"Long live the King!" repeated Mink, and Fisher, and the rest of them in chorus.

"Now that's settled," announced Wolverine.

"Thank you, Comrades," said Black Fox; "you honour me. I will try to be just, and look after you carefully. May I have Wolverine as Lieutenant again?"

They all agreed to this.

THE VALUE OF THEIR FUR

"Now that's serious business enough for one day," declared the King; "Jack, you may tell us about the fur, and perhaps some of the others also have interesting tales to relate."

Whisky-Jack hopped down from his perch, and strutted proudly about in the circle.

"Mink," he began, snapping his beak to clear his throat, "you can chase a silly, addle-headed Fish into the mud and eat him, but you don't know the price of your own coat. Listen! The Black King's jacket is worth more than your fur and all the others put together. I heard the Factor at Wapiscaw tell his clerk about it last Winter when I dined with him."

"You mean when you dined with the Train Dogs," sneered Pisew.

"You'll dine with them some day, and their stomachs will be fuller than yours," retorted the Bird. "Mink, your pelt is worth a dollar and a half–'three skins,' as the Company Men say when they are trading with the Indians, for a skin means fifty cents. You wood-dwellers didn't know that, I suppose."

"What do they sell my coat for?" queried Beaver.

"Six dollars–twelve skins, for a prime, dark one. Kit-Beaver, that's one of your Babies, old Trowel Tail, sells for fifty cents–or is given away. You, Fisher, and you, Otter, are nip and tuck–eight or ten dollars, according to whether your fur is black or of a dirty coffee colour. But there's Pisew; he's got a hide as big as a blanket, and it sells for only two dollars. Do you know what they do with your skin, Slink? They line long cloaks for the White Wives with it; because it's soft and warm,–also cheap and nasty. He, he! old Feather-bed Fur.

"Now, Wapistan, the Marten, they call a little gentleman. It's wonderful how he has grown in their affections, though. Why, I remember, five years ago the Company was paying only three skins for prime Marten; and what do you suppose your hide sells for now, wee Brother?"

"Please don't," pleaded Marten, "it's a painful subject; I wish they couldn't sell it at all. I'm almost afraid to touch anything to eat–there's sure to be a Trap underneath. The other day I saw a nice, fat White Fish head, and thought Mink had left a bite for me; but when I reached for it, bang! went a pair of steel jaws,

scraping my very nose. Fat Fish! it was a close shave–I'm trembling yet; the jagged teeth looked so viciously cruel. If my leg had got in them I know what I should have had to do."

"So do I," asserted Jack.

"What would he have done, Babbler–you who know all things?" asked Lynx.

"Died!" solemnly croaked Jay.

"I should have had to cut off my leg, as a cousin of mine did," declared Wapistan. "He's still alive, but we all help him get a living now. I wish my skin was as cheap as Muskrat's."

"Oh, bless us! he's only worth fifteen cents," remonstrated Jack. "His wool is but used for lining–put on the inside of Men's big coats where it won't show. But your fur, dear Pussy Marten, is worth eight dollars; think of that! Of course that's for a prime pelt. That Brother of yours, sitting over there with the faded yellow jacket, wouldn't fetch more than three or four at the outside; but I'll give you seven for yours now, and chance it–shouldn't wonder if you'd fetch twelve when they skin you, for your coat is nice and black."

"I suppose there's no price on your hide," whined Lynx; "it's nice to be of no value in the world–isn't it?"

"There's always a price on brains; but that doesn't interest you, Silly, does it? You're not in the market. Your understanding runs to a fine discrimination in perfumes–prominent odours, like Castoreum, or dead Fish. If you were a Man you'd have been a hair-dresser.

"Muskwa, your pelt's a useful one; still it doesn't sell for a very great figure. Last year at Wapiscaw I saw pictures on the Factor's walls of men they call Soldiers, and they had the queerest, great, tall head-covers, made from the skins of cousins of yours. And the Factor also had a Bear pelt on the floor, which he said was a good one, worth twenty dollars–that's your value dead, twenty dollars.

"Mooswa's shaggy shirt is good; but they scrape the hair off and make moccasins of the leather. Think of that, Weed-eater; perhaps next year the Trappers will be walking around in your hide, killing your Brother, or your Daddy, or some other big-nosed, spindle-legged member of your family. The homeliest man in the whole Chippewa tribe they have named 'The Moose,' and he's the ugliest creature I ever saw; you'd be ashamed of him–he's even ashamed of himself."

"What's the hide worth?" asked Carcajou.

"Seven dollars the Factor pays in trade, which is another name for robbery; but I think it's dear at that price, with no hair on, for it is tanned, of course–the Squaws make the skin into leather. You wouldn't believe, though, that they'd ever be able to skin Bushy-tail, would you?"

"What! the Skunk?" cried Lynx. "Haven't the Men any noses?"

”Not like yours, Slink; but they take his pelt right enough; and the white stripes down his back that he’s so proud of are dyed, and these Men, who are full of lies, sell it as some kind of Sable. And Marten, too, they sell him as Sable–Canadian Sable.”

”I’m sure we are all enjoying this,” suggested Black King, sarcastically.

”Yes, Brothers,” assented Whisky-Jack, ”Black Fox’s silver hide is worth more than all the rest put together. Sometimes it fetches *Five Hundred Dollars*!”

”Oh!” exclaimed Otter, enviously; ”is that true, Jack?”

”It is, Bandy-legs–I always speak the truth; but it is only a fad. A tribe of Men called Russians buy Silver Fox; it is said they have a lot of money, but, like Pisew, little brains. For my part, I’d rather have feathers; they don’t rub off, and are nicer in every way. Do you know who likes your coat, Carcajou?”

”The Russians!” piped Mink, like a little school-boy.

”Stupid Fish-eater! Bigger fools than the Russians buy Wolverine–the Eskimo, who live away down at the mouth of the big river that runs to the icebergs.”

”What are icebergs, Brother?” asked Mink.

”Pieces of ice,” answered Jack. ”Now you know everything, go and catch a Goldeye for your supper.”

”Goldeye don’t come up the creeks, you ignorant Bird,” retorted Sakwasew. ”I wish they did, though; one can see their big, yellow eyes so far in the water–they’re easily caught.”

”Suckers are more useful,” chimed in Fisher; ”when they crowd the river banks in Autumn, eating those black water-bugs, I get fat, and hardly wet a foot; I hate the water, but I do like a plump, juicy Sucker.”

”Not to be compared to a Goldeye or Doré,” objected Mink; ”they’re too soft and flabby.”

”Fish, Fish, Fish! always about Fish, or something to eat, with you Water-Rats,” interrupted Carcajou, disgustedly. ”Do let us get back to the subject. Do you know what the Men say of our Black King, Comrades?”

”They call him The Devil!” declared Jay.

”No they don’t,” objected Carcajou; ”they aver he’s Wiesahkechack, the great Indian God, who could change himself into Animals–that’s what they think. You all know François, the French Half-breed, who trapped at Hay River last Winter.”

”He killed my First Cousin,” sighed Marten.

”I lost a Son by him–poisoned,” moaned Black King’s Mother, the Red Widow, who had been sitting quietly during the meeting watching with maternal pride the form of her son.

”Yes, he tried to catch me,” boasted Carcajou, ”but I outwitted him, and threw a Number Four Steel Trap in the river. He had a fight with a Chippewa

Indian over it–blamed him for the theft. Oh, I enjoyed that. I was hidden under a Spruce log, and watched François pummel the Indian until he ran away. I don't understand much French, but the Half-breed used awful language. I wish they'd always fight amongst themselves."

"Why didn't the Chippewa squeeze François till he was dead?–that's what I should have done," growled Muskwa. "Do you remember Nichemous, the Cree Half-breed, who always keeps his hat tied on with a handkerchief?"

"I saw him once," declared Black Fox.

"Well, he tried to shoot me–crept up close to a log I was lying behind, and poked his Ironstick over it, thinking I was asleep. That was in the Winter–I think it was the Second of February: but do you know, sometimes I get my dates mixed. One year I forgot in my sleep, and came out on the First to see what the weather was like. Ha, ha! fancy that; coming out on the First and thought it was the Second."

"What has that got to do with Nichemous, old Garrulity?" squeaked Whisky-Jack.

Muskwa licked his gray nose apologetically for having wandered from the subject. "Well, as I have said, it was the Second of February; I had been lying up all Winter in a tremendously snug nest in a little coulee that runs off Pembina River. Hunger! but I was weak when I came out that day."

"I should think you would have been," sympathized the Bird, mockingly.

"I had pains, too; the hard Red-willow Berries that I always eat before I lay up were griping me horribly–they always do that–they're my medicine, you know."

"Muskwa is getting old," interrupted Jay. "He's garrulous–it's his pains and aches now."

Bear took no notice of the Bird. "I was tired and cross; the sun was nice and warm, and I lay down behind a log to rest a little. Suddenly there was a sound of the crisp hide of the snow cracking, and at first I thought it was something to eat coming,–something for my hunger. I looked cautiously over the tree, and there was Nichemous trailing me; his snow-shoe had cut through the crust; but it was too late to run, for that Ironstick of his would have reached; so I lay still, pretending to be asleep. Nichemous crept up, oh, so cunningly. He didn't want to wake poor old Muskwa, you see–not until he woke me with the bark of his Ironstick. Talk about smells, Mister Lynx. Wifh! the breath of that when it coughs is worse than the smell of Coyote–it's fairly blue in the air, it's so bad."

"Where was Nichemous all this time?" cried Jack, mockingly.

"Have patience, little shaganappi (cheap) Bird. Nichemous saw my trail leading up to the log, but could not see it going away on the other side. I had just one eye cocked up where I could watch his face. Wheeze! it was a study. He'd

[image]

"SO I LAY STILL, PRETENDING TO BE ASLEEP."

raise one foot, shove it forward gently, put that big gut-woven shoe down slowly on the snow, and carry his body forward; then the other foot the same way, so as not to disturb me. Good, kind Nichemous! What a queer scent he gave to the air. Have any of you ever stepped on hot coals, and burned your foot?"

"I have!" cried Blue Wolf; "I had a fight with three Train Dogs once, at Wapiscaw, when their Masters were asleep. It was all over a miserable frozen White Fish that even the Dogs wouldn't eat. They were husky fighters. Wur-r-r! we rolled over and over, and finally I fetched up in the camp-fire."

"Then you know what your paw smelled like when the coals scorched it; and that is just the nasty scent that came down the air from Nichemous–like burnt skin. I could have nosed him a mile away had he been up wind, but he wasn't at first. When Nichemous got to the big log, he reached his yellow face over, with the Ironstick in line with his nose, and I saw murder in his eyes, so I just took one swipe at the top of his head with my right paw and scalped him clean. Whu-u-o-o-f-f-! but he yelled. The Ironstick barked as he went head first into the snow, and its hot breath scorched my arm–underneath where there's little hair; but the round iron thing it spits out didn't touch me. I gave Nichemous a squeeze, threw him down, and went away. I was mad enough to have slain him, but I'm glad I didn't. It's not good to kill a Man. You see I was cross," he added, apologetically, "and my head ached from living in that stuffy hole all Winter."

"Didn't it hurt your paw?" queried Jack. "I should have thought your fingers would have been tender from sucking them so much while you were sleeping in the nest."

"That's what saved Nichemous's life," answered Muskwa. "My fist was swollen up like a moss-bag, else the blow would have crushed his skull. But I knocked the fur all off the top; and his wife, who is a great medicine woman, couldn't make it grow again; though she patched the skin up some way or other. That is why you'll see Nichemous's hat tied on with a red handkerchief always."

"I also know of this Man," wheezed Otter. "Nichemous stepped on my slide once when he was poaching my preserve–I had it all nice and smooth, and slippery, and the silly creature, without a claw to his foot, tried to walk on it."

"What happened, Long-Back?" asked Jack, eagerly.

"Well, he went down the slide faster than ever I did, head first; but, would you believe it, on his back."

”Into the water?” queried Muskrat. ”That wouldn’t hurt him.”

”He was nearly drowned,” laughed Nekik. ”The current carried him under some logs, but he got out, I’m sorry to say. That’s the worst of it, we never manage to kill these Men.”

”I killed one once,” proclaimed Mooswa–”stamped him with my front feet, and his friends never found him; but I wouldn’t do it again, the look in his eyes was awful–no, I’ll never do it again.”

”They’ll kill you some day, Marrow-Bones,” declared Jay, blithely.

”That’s what this Man tried to do.”

”Tell us about it, Comrade,” cried Carcajou, ”for I like to hear of the tables being turned once in a while. Why, Mistress Carcajou frightens the babies to sleep by telling them that François, or Nichemous, or some other Trapper will catch them if they don’t close their eyes and stop crying–it’s just awful to live in continual dread of Man.”

”He was an Indian named Grasshead,” began Mooswa, lying down to tell the little tale comfortably. ”I had just crossed the Athabasca on the ice; he’d been watching, no doubt, and as I went up the bank his Firestick coughed, and the ball struck me in the neck. Of course I cleared off into the woods at a great rate.”

”Didn’t stop to thank the Man, eh, old Pretty Legs?” questioned Jack, ironically.

”There was a treacherous crust on the snow; sometimes it would bear me up, and sometimes I would go through up to my chest, for it was deep. Grasshead wore those big shoes that Muskwa speaks of, and glided along the top; but my feet are small and hard, you know, and cut the crust.”

”See!” piped Jay, ”there’s where pride comes in. All of you horned creatures are so proud of your little feet, and unless the ground is hard you soon get done up.”

”Well,” continued Mooswa, ”sometimes I’d draw away many miles from the Indian. Once I circled wide, went back close to my trail, laid down in a thicket, and watched for him. He passed quite close, trailing along easily on top of the snow, chewing a piece of dried moose-meat–think of that, Brothers! stuck in his loose shirt was dried-meat, cut from the bodies of some of my relatives; even the shirt itself was made from one of their hides. His little eyes were vicious and cruel; and several times I heard him give the call of our wives, which is, ’Wh-e-a-u-h-h-h!’ That was that I might come back, thinking it was one of my tribe calling. All day he trailed me that way, and twice I rested as I speak of. Then Grasshead got cunning. He travelled wide of my trail, off to one side, meaning to come upon me lying down or circling. The second day of his pursuit I was very tired, and the Indian was always coming closer and closer.

”Getting desperate, I laid a trap for him. It was the Firestick I feared really;

for without that he was no match for me. With our natural strength, he with his arms and teeth, and I with my hoofs and horns, I could kill him easily. Why, once I slew three Wolves, nearly as large as Rof; they were murderous chaps who tackled me in the night. It wouldn't do to fight Grasshead where the crust was bad on the deep snow, so I made for a Jack-pine bluff."

"I know," interrupted Black Fox, nodding his head; "nice open ground with no underbrush to bother–just the place for a rush when you've marked down your Bird. Many a Partridge I've pinned in one of those bluffs."

"Yes," went on Mooswa, "the pine needles kill out everything but the silver-green moss. The snow wasn't very deep there; it was an ideal place for a charge–nothing to catch one's horns, or trip a fellow. As Grasshead came up he saw me leaning wearily against a tree, and thought I was ready to drop. I was tired, but not quite that badly used up. You all know, Comrades, how careful an Indian is not to waste the breath of his Ironstick; he will creep, and creep, and sneak, just like–"

"Lynx," suggested Whisky-Jack.

"Well, Grasshead, seeing that I couldn't get away, as he thought, came cautiously to within about five lengths, meaning to make sure of my death, you know, Brothers; and just as he raised his Ironstick I charged. He didn't expect that–it frightened him. The ball struck me in the shoulder, and made me furious with rage. The Indian turned to run; but I cut him down, and trampled him to death–I ground him into the frozen earth with my antlers. He gave the queer Man-cry that is of fear and pain–it's awful! I wish he hadn't followed me–I wish I hadn't killed him."

[image]

"THE BALL STRUCK ME IN THE SHOULDER, AND MADE ME FURIOUS WITH RAGE."

"You were justified, Mooswa," said Black King; "there is no blame–that is the Law of the Forest:–

"'First we run for our lives,
Then we fight for our lives:
And we turn at bay when the killer drives."

"Bravo, bravo!" applauded Whisky-Jack. "Don't fret about the Indian, old Jelly-

Nose. I'm glad you killed him. I've heard the White Trappers say that the only good Indians are the dead ones."

"My own opinion is that Indians are a fat-meat sight better than the Whites," declared Carcajou; "they don't tell as many lies, and they won't steal. They never lock a door here, but they do in the Whiteman's land. An Indian just puts his food down any place, or up on a cache, and nobody touches it; only, of course, the White Men who were here in the Boundaries last year looking for the yellow-sand–they stole from the caches."

"Nobody?" screamed Jay. "Nobody? What do you call yourself, Carcajou? How many bags of flour have you ripped open that didn't belong to you? How many pounds of bacon have melted away because of your hot mouth? I know. I've heard Ambrose, and François, and every other Trapper from the Landing to Fort Simpson swear you're the biggest thief since the time of Wiesahkechack. Why, you're as bad as a White Man by your own showing."

"Gently, Brother, gently. Didst ever hear your Men Friends tell the story of the pot and the kettle? Besides, is it unfair that I, or any of us, take a little from those who come here to steal the coats off our backs, and the lives from our hearts?"

"Indeed thou art the pot, Carcajou," retorted Jack; "but what do I steal? True, I took the piece of soap thinking it was butter; but that was a trifle, not the size of a Trap Bait; and if I take the Meat out of their Traps I do so that my Comrades may not be caught?"

"It is written in the Law of the Forest that is not stealing," said Black King, solemnly. "The Bait that is put in the Trap is for those of the Forest, so come it they be not caught; and even though the Trappers say otherwise, there is no wrong in taking it."

"I also take the Bait-meat," cried Wolverine, "for the good of my Brothers; but I spring the Trap too, lest by accident they put their foot in it."

"I also know Nichemous," broke in Umisk, the Beaver. "He cut a hole in the roof of my house one day, first blocking up the front door thinking we were inside, and meaning to catch us; he had his trouble for nothing, for I got the whole family out just in the nick of time; but I'd like to make him pay for repairs to the roof. I don't know any animal so bad as a Man, unless it's a Hermit Beaver."

"What's a Hermit Beaver, you of the little fore-feet?" asked Jay.

Umisk sighed wearily. "For a Bird that has travelled as much as you have, Jack, you are wondrous devoid of knowledge. Have you never seen Red Jack, the Hermit?"

"I have," declared Pisew, "he has a piece out of the side of his tail."

"Perhaps you have, perhaps you have; but all hermits are marked that way–that's the sign. You see, once in a while a Beaver is born lazy–won't work–will

do nothing but steal other people's Poplar and eat it. First we reason with him, and try to encourage him to work; if that fails we bite a piece out of his tail as a brand, and turn him out of the community. I marked Red Jack that way myself; I boarded him for a whole Winter, though, first."

"Served him right," concurred Whisky-Jack.

"Yes, Nichemous is a bad lot," said Carcajou, reflectively; "but he's no worse than François."

Black Fox rose, stretched himself, yawned, and said: "The Meeting is over for to-day; three spaces of darkness from this we meet here again; there is some business of the Hunting Boundaries to do, and Wapoos has a complaint to make."

"I'm off," whistled Whisky-Jack. "Good-bye, Your Majesty. You fellows have got to hunt your dinner, I'm going to dine with some Men–I like my food cooked."

Each of the Animals slipped away, leaving Black Fox and his Mother, the Red Widow.

"I'm proud of you, my Son," said the Fox Mother. "Come home with me, I've got something rare for dinner."

"What is it, Dame?"

"A nice, fat Wavey" (kind of goose).

"What! Wawao, who nests in the Athabasca Lake? You make my mouth water, Mother. These Mossberry-fed Partridge are so dry they give me indigestion; besides, I never saw them so scarce as they are this year."

"It was the great fire the river Boatmen started in the Summer which burnt up all their eggs that makes them so scarce, Son. Do you not remember how we had to fly to the river, and lie for days with our noses just above water to escape the heat?"

"It's an ill wind, Mother, that blows nobody good, for it nearly cured me of fleas. My fur is not like Beaver's. But the Wavies fly high, and do not nest hereabout–how came you by the Fat Bird?"

"A Hunter hurt it with his Firestick, and it fell in the water with a broken wing. I was watching. I think he is still looking down the river for his Wavey."

THE LAW OF THE BOUNDARIES

Three days later, as had been spoken in the Council, Black King, accompanied

by three Fox Brothers, and his Mother the Red Widow, crept cautiously into the open space that was fringed by a tangle of Red and Gray Willows, inside of which grew a second frieze of Raspberry Bushes, sat on his haunches and peered discontentedly, furtively about. There was nobody, nothing in sight–nothing but the dilapidated old Hudson's Bay Company's Log Shack that had been a Trading Post, and against which Time had leaned so heavily that the rotted logs were sent sprawling in a disconsolate heap.

"This does not look overmuch like our Council Court, does it, Dame?" he asked of the Red Widow. "I, the King, am first to arrive–ah, here is Rof!" as Blue Wolf slouched into the open, his froth-lined jaws swinging low in suspicious watchfulness.

"I'm late," he growled, sniffing at each bush and stump as he made the circuit of the Court. "What! only Your Majesty and the Red Widow here as yet. It's bad form for our Comrades to keep the King waiting."

While Blue Wolf was still speaking the Willows were thrust open as though a tree had crashed through them, and Mooswa's massive head protruded, just for all the world as if hanging from a wall in the hall of some great house. His Chinese-shaped eyes blinked at the light. "May I be knock-kneed," he wheezed plaintively, "if it didn't take me longer to do those thirty miles this morning than I thought it would–the going was so soft. I should have been here on time, though, if I hadn't struck just the loveliest patch of my favourite weed at Little Rapids–where the fire swept last year, you know."

"That's what the Men call Fire-weed," cried Carcajou, pushing his strong body through the fringe of berry bushes.

"That's because they don't know," retorted Mooswa; "and because it always grows in good soil after the Fire has passed, I suppose."

"Where does the seed come from, Mooswa?" asked Lynx, who had come up while they were talking. "Does the Fire bring it?"

"I don't know," answered the Bull Moose.

"It is not written in Man's books, either," affirmed Carcajou.

"Can the King, who is so wise, tell us?" pleaded Fisher, who had arrived.

"Manitou sends it!" Black Fox asserted decisively.

"The King answers worthily," declared Wolverine. "If Mooswa can stand in the Fire-flower until it tops his back, and eat of the juice-filled stalk without straining his short neck until his belly is like the gorge of a Sturgeon, what matters how it has come. Let the Men, who are silly creatures, bother over that. Manitou has sent it, and it is good; that is enough for Mooswa."

"You are late, Nekik," said the King, severely; "and you, too, Sakwasu."

"I am lame!" pleaded Otter.

"My ear is bleeding!" said Mink.

”Who got the Fish?” queried Carcajou. They both tried to look very innocent.

”What Fish?” asked Black Fox.

”My Fish,” replied Mink.

”Mine!” claimed Otter, in the same breath.

Wolverine winked solemnly at the Red Widow.

”Yap! that won’t do–been fighting!” came from the King.

”It was a Doré, Your Majesty,” pleaded Sakwasu, ”and I caught him first.”

”Just as I dove for him,” declared Otter, ”Sakwasu followed after and tried to take him from me–a great big Fish it was. I’ve been fishing for four years, but this was the biggest Doré I ever saw–why, he was the length of Pisew.”

”A Fisherman’s lie,” quoth the Red Widow.

”Who got the Doré? That’s the main question,” demanded Carcajou.

”He escaped,” replied Nekik, sorrowfully; ”and we have come to the Meeting without any breakfast.”

”Bah! Bah! Bah!” laughed Blue Wolf; ”that’s rich! Hey, Muskwa, you heard the end of the story–isn’t it good?”

”I, too, have had no breakfast,” declared Muskwa, ”so I don’t see the point–it’s not a bit funny. Seven hard-baked Ant Hills have I torn up in the grass-flat down by the river, and not a single dweller in one of them. My arms ache, for the clay was hard; and the dust has choked up my lungs. Wuf-f-f! I could hardly get my breath coming up the hill, and I have more mortar in my lungs than Ants in my stomach.”

”Are there no Berries to be had, then, Muskwa?” asked Wapistan.

”Oh, yes; there are Berries hereabouts, but they’re all hard and bitter. The white Dogberries, and the pink Buffalo-berries, and the Wolf-willow berries–what are they? Perhaps not to be despised in this Year of Famine, for they pucker up one’s stomach until a Cub’s ration fills it; but the Saskatoons are now dry on the Bush, and I miss them sorely. Gluck! they’re the berries–full of oil, not vinegar; a feed of them is like eating a little Sucking Pig.”

”What’s a Sucking Pig?” queried Lynx; ”I never saw one growing.”

”I know,” declared Carcajou. ”The Priest over at Wapiscaw had six little white fellows in a small corral. They had voices like Pallas, the Black Eagle. I could always tell when they were being fed, their wondrous song reached a good three miles.”

”That’s where I got mine,” remarked Muskwa, looking cautiously about to see that there were no eavesdroppers; ”I had three, and the Priest keeps three. But talking of food, one Summer I crossed the great up-hills that Men call Rockies, and along the rivers of that land grows just the loveliest Berry any poor Bear ever ate.”

”Saskatoons?” queried Carcajou.

”No, the Salmon Berry–great, yellow, juicy chaps, the size of Mooswa’s nose.”

”Fat Birds! what a sized Berry!” ejaculated the Widow, dubiously.

”Well, almost as big,” modified Muskwa; ”and sweet and nippy. Ugh! ugh! It was like eating a handful of the fattest black Ants you ever tasted.”

”I don’t eat Ants,” declared the Red Widow.

”Neither did I this morning, I’m sorry to say,” added Bear, hungrily.

”Weren’t they hairy little Beggars, Muskwa?” asked Blue Wolf, harking back longingly to the meat food.

”What, the Salmon Berries?”

”No; the Padre’s little Pigs at Wapiscaw.”

”Yes, somewhat; I had bristles in my teeth for a week–awfully coarse fur they wore. But they were noisy little rats–the screeching gave me an earache. Huf, huf, huh! You should have seen the Factor, who is a fat, pot-bellied little Chap, built like Carcajou, come running with his short Otter-shaped legs when he heard me among the Pigs.”

”What did you do, Muskwa–weren’t you afraid?” asked the Red Widow.

”I threw a little Pig out of the corral and he took to the Forest. The Factor in his excitement ran after him, and I laughed so much to see this that I really couldn’t eat a fourth Pig.”

”But you did well,” cried Black King; ”there’s nothing like a good laugh at meal-time to aid digestion.”

”I thought they would eat like that, Muskwa,” continued Blue Wolf. ”You remember the thick, white-furred animals they once brought to the Mission at Lac La Biche?”

”Sheep,” interposed Mooswa, ”I remember them; stupid creatures they were–always frightened by something; and always bunching up together like the Plain Buffalo, so that a Killer had more slaying than running to do amongst them.”

”That was the worst of it,” declared Blue Wolf. ”My Pack acted as foolishly as Man did with the Buffalo–killed them all off in a single season, for that very reason.”

”And for that trick Man put the blood-bounty on your scalp,” cried Carcajou.

”Oh, the bounty doesn’t matter so long as I keep the scalp on my own head. But, as I was going to say, the queer fur they had got into my teeth, and made me fair furious. Where one Sheep would have sufficed for my supper, I killed three–though I’m generally of an even temper. The Priest did much good in this country–”

”Bringing in the Sheep, eh?” interrupted Carcajou.

”Perhaps, perhaps; each one according as his interests are affected.”

”The Priests are a benefit,” asserted Marten. ”The Father at Little Slave Lake had a corral full of the loveliest tame Grouse–Chickens, they called them. They were like the Sheep, silly enough to please the laziest Hunter.”

”Did you join the Mission, Brother?” asked Carcajou, licking his chops hungrily.

”For three nights,” answered Wapistan, ”then I left it, carrying a scar on my hip from the snap of a white bob-tailed Dog they call a Fox-terrier. A busy, meddlesome, yelping little cur, lacking the composure of a Dweller in the Boundaries. I became disgusted at his clatter and cleared out.”

”A Fox *what*?” asked the Red Widow. ”He was not of our tribe to interfere with a Comrade’s Kill.”

”It must have been great hunting,” remarked Black King, his mouth watering at the idea of a corral full of Chickens.

”It was!” asserted Wapistan. ”All in a row they sat, shoulder to shoulder–it was night, you know. They simply blinked at me with their glassy eyes, and exclaimed, ’Peek! Peek!’ until I cut their throats. Yes, the Mission is a good thing.”

”It is,” concurred Black King–”they should establish more of them. But where in the world is Chatterbox, the Jay?”

”Gabbler the Fool must have trailed in with a party of Men going down the river,” suggested Carcajou. ”Nothing but eating would keep him away from a party of talkers.”

”Well, Comrades,” said Black King, ”shall the Boundaries be the same as last year? Are there any changes to be made?”

”I roam everywhere; is that not so, King?” asked Muskwa.

”Yes; but not eat everywhere. There is truce for the young Beaver, because workmen are not free to the Kill.”

”I have not eaten of Trowel Tail’s Children,” declared Muskwa, proudly. ”I have kept the Law of the Boundaries.”

”And yet he has lost two sons,” said Black Fox, looking sternly about.

A tear trickled down the sandy beard of Beaver and glistened on his black nose.

”Two sturdy Sons, Your Majesty, a year old. Next year, or the year after, they would have gone out and built lodges of their own. Such plasterers I never saw in my life. Why, their work was as smooth as the inner bark of the Poplar; and no two Beavers on the whole length of Pelican River could cut down a tree with them.”

”Oh, never mind their virtues, Trowel Tail,” interrupted Carcajou, heartlessly; ”they are dead–that is the main thing; and who killed them, the question.

Who broke the Boundary Law is what we want to know."

"Whisky-Jack should be here during the inquiry," grumbled the King. "He's our detective–Jack sees everything, tells everything, and finds out everything. Shouldn't wonder but he knows–strange that he's not with us."

"Must have struck some Men friends, Your Majesty," said the Bull Moose. "As I drank at the river, twenty miles up, one of those floating houses the Traders use passed with two Men in it. There was the smell of hot Meat came to me, and if Jack was within a Bird's scent of the river, which is a long distance, he also would know of the food."

"Very likely, Mooswa," rejoined Black King. "A cooked pork rind would coax Jay from his duty any time. We must go on with the enquiry without him. Who broke the Law of the Boundaries and killed Umisk's two Sons?" he demanded sternly.

"I didn't," wheezed Mooswa, rubbing his big, soft nose caressingly down Beaver's back, as the latter sat on one of the old stumps. "I have kept the law. Like Muskwa I roam from lake to lake, and from river to river; but I kill no one–that is, with one exception."

"That was within the law," asserted the King, "for we kill in our own defence."

"I think it was Pisew," whispered the Red Widow. "See the Sneak's eye. Call him up, O Son, and command him to look straight into your Royal Face and say if he has kept the law."

"Pisew," commanded Black Fox, "come closer!"

Lynx started guiltily at the call of his name. There was something soft and unpleasant in the slipping sound of his big muffled feet as he walked toward the King.

"Has Pisew kept the Law of the Boundaries?" asked Black King, sternly, looking full in the mustached face of the slim-bodied cat.

Lynx turned his head sideways, and his eyes sought to avoid those of the questioner.

"Your Majesty, I roam from the Pelican on one side, to Fish Creek on the other; and the law is that therein I, who eat flesh, may kill Wapoos the Rabbit. This year it has been hard living, Your Majesty–hard living. Because of the fire, Wapoos fled beyond the waters of the creeks, and I have eaten of the things that could not fly the Boundaries–Mice, and Frogs, and Slugs: a diet that is horrible to think of. Look, Your Majesty, at my gaunt sides–am I not like one that is already skinned by the Trappers?"

"He is making much talk," whispered the Red Widow, "to the end that you forget the murder of Trowel Tail's Sons."

"Didst like Beaver Meat?" queried Black King, abruptly.

”I am not the slayer of Umisk’s children,” denied Lynx. ”It was Wapoos, or Whisky-Jack; they are mischief makers, and ready for any evil.”

”Oh, you silly liar!” cried Carcajou, in derision. ”Wapoos the Rabbit kill a Beaver? Why not say the Moon came down and ate them up. Thou hast a sharp nose and a full appetite, but little brain.”

”He is a poor liar!” remarked the Red Widow.

”I have kept the law,” whined Lynx. ”I have eaten so little that I am starved.”

”What shall we do, Brothers, about the murdered Sons of Umisk? Beaver is the worker of our lands. But for him, and the dams he builds, the Muskegs would soon dry up, the fires would burn the Forests, and we should have no place to live. If we kill the Sons, presently there will be no workers–nobody but ourselves who are Killers.” Black Fox thus put the case wisely to the others.

”Gr-a-a-h-wuh! let me speak,” cried Blue Wolf. ”Pisew has done this thing. If any in my Pack make a kill and I come to speak of it, do I not know from their eyes that grow tired, which it is?”

Said the Lieutenant, Carcajou: ”I think you are right, Rof; but you can’t hang a Comrade because he has weak eyes. No one has seen Pisew make the kill. We must have a new law, Your Majesty. That if again Kit-Beaver, or Cub-Fox, or Babe-Wapoos, or Young-Anyone is slain for eating, we shall all, sitting in Council, decide who is to pay the penalty. I think that will stop this murderous poaching.”

”It will,” whispered the Red Widow. ”Lynx will never touch one of them again. He knows what Carcajou means.”

”That is a new law, then,” cried the King. ”If any of Umisk’s children are killed by one of us, sitting in Council we shall decide who is to be executed for the crime.”

”Please, Your Majesty,” squeaked Rabbit, ”I keep the Boundary Law, but others do not. From Beaver’s dam to the Pelican, straighter than a Man’s trail, are my three Run-ways. My Cousin’s family has three more; and in the Muskeg our streets run clear to view. Beyond our Run-ways we do not go. Nor do we build houses in violation of the law–only roads are we allowed, and these we have made. In the Muskeg parks, the nice open places Beaver has formed by damming back the waters, we labor.

”When the young Spruce are growing, and would choke up the park, we strip the bark off and they die, and the open is still with us. Neither do we kill any Animal, nor make trouble for them–keeping well within the law. Are we not ourselves food for all the Animal Kingdom? Lynx lives off us, and Marten lives off us, and Fox lives off us, and Wolf and Bear sometimes. Neither I nor my Tribe complains, because that law is older than the laws we make ourselves.

”But have we not certain rights which are known to the Council? For one

hour in the morning, and one hour in the evening, just when the Sun and the Stars change their season of toil, are we not to be free from the Hunting?"

"Yes, it is written," replied Black King, "that no one shall kill Wapoos at the hour of dusk and the hour of dawn. Has anyone done so?"

"If they have, it's a shame!" cried Carcajou. "I do not eat Wapoos; but if everything else fails–if the Fish fail, if there are no Berries, if the Nuts and the Seeds are dried in the heart before they ripen, we still have Wapoos to carry us over. The Indians know this–it is of their history; and many a time has Wapoos, the Rabbit, our Little Brother, saved them from starvation."

"Who has slain Wapoos at the forbidden hour?" thundered Black King.

Again there was denial all around the circle; and again everybody felt convinced that Lynx was the breaker of the law. Said Black Fox: "It is well because of the new ruling we have passed, I think. If again Wapoos is killed or hunted at the forbidden hours, we shall decide in Council who must die."

"Also, O King," still pleaded Rabbit, "for all time have we claimed another protection. You know our way of life. For seven years we go on peopling the streets of our Muskeg Cities, growing more plentiful all the time, until there is a great population. Then comes the sickness on The Seventh Year, and we die off like Flies."

"It has been so for sixty years," assented Mooswa. "My father, who is sixty, has always known of this thing."

"For a hundred times sixty, Brother," quoth Carcajou; "it is so written in the legends of the Indians."

"It is a queer sickness," continued Wapoos. "The lumps come in our throats, and under our arms, and it kills. Your Majesty knows the Law of the Seventh Season."

"Yes, it is that no one shall eat Wapoos that year, or next."

"Most wise ruling!" concurred Carcajou. "The Rabbits with the lumps in their necks are poisonous. Besides, when there are so few of them, if they were eaten, the food supply of the Boundaries would be forever gone. A most wise rule."

"Has any one violated this protection-right?" asked the King.

"Yes, Your Majesty. This is the Seventh Year, is it not?" said Rabbit.

"Bless me! so it is," exclaimed Mooswa, thoughtfully. "I, who do not eat Rabbits, have paid no attention to the calendar. I wondered what made the woods so silent and dreary; that's just it. No pudgy little Wapooses darting across one's path. Why, now I remember, last year, The Year of the Plenty, when I laid down for a rest they'd be all about me. Actually sat up on my side many a time."

"Yes, it's the Seventh Year," whined Lynx; "look how thin I am. Perhaps miles and miles of river bank, and not even a Frog to be had."

”Alas! it’s the Plague-year,” declared Wapoos; ”and my whole family were stricken with the sickness. They died off one–by–one–” Here he stopped, and covered his big, sympathetic eyes with soft, fur-ruffed hands. His tender heart choked.

Mooswa sniffed through his big nose, and browsed absent-mindedly off the Gray-willows. My! but they were bitter–he never ate them at any time; but one must do something when a Father is talking about his dead Children.

”Did they all die, Wapoos?” asked Otter; and in his black snake-like eyes there actually glistened a tear of sympathy.

”Yes; and our whole city was almost depopulated.”

”Dreadful!” cried Carcajou.

”The nearest neighbor left me was a Widow on the third main Run-way–two cross-paths from my lane. All her family died off, even the Husband. We were a great help to each other in the way of consolation, and became fast friends. Yesterday morning, when I called to talk over our affliction, there was nothing left of her but a beautiful, white, fluffy tail.”

”Horrible! oh, the Wretch!” screamed Black Fox’s Mother; ”to treat a Widow that way–eat her!”

”If I knew who did it,” growled Muskwa, savagely, ”I would break his neck with one stroke of my fist. Poor little Wapoos! come over here. Eat these Black Currants that I’ve just picked–I don’t want them.”

”That is a most criminal breach of the law,” said the King, with emphasis. ”If Wapoos can prove who did it, we’ll give the culprit quick justice.”

”Flif–fluf, flif–fluf,” came the sound of wings at this juncture, and with an erratic swoop Whisky-Jack shot into the circle.

He was trembling with excitement–something of tremendous importance had occurred; every blue-gray feather of his coat vibrated with it. He strutted about to catch his breath, and his walk was the walk of one who feels his superiority.

”Good-morning, Glib-tongue!” greeted Carcajou.

”Welcome, Clerk!” said the King, graciously.

”Hop up on my antler,” murmured Mooswa, condescendingly; ”you’ll get your throat full of dust down there.”

Whisky-Jack swished up on the big platter-like leaf that was the first spread of Mooswa’s lordly crown. He picked a remnant of meat food from his beak with his big toe, coughed three times impressively, and commenced:–

”Comrades, who do you suppose has come within our Boundaries?”

”Is it Cougar, the Slayer?” asked Black King, apprehensively.

”Is it Death Song, the Rattler, he who glides?” cried Marten, his little legs trembling with fear.

”Has my cousin, Ookistutoowan the Grizzly, come down from his home in the up-hills to dispute with me the way of the road?” queried Black Bear, Muskwa. ”I am ready for him!” he declared, shaking his back like a huge St. Bernard.

”Didst see Train Dogs, bearer of ill news?” demanded Wolf. ”Ur-r-r! I fear not!” and he bared his great yellow fangs viciously.

”Worse, worse still!” piped Whisky-Jack, spreading his wings out, and sloping his small round head down toward them. ”Worse than any you have mentioned–some one to make you all tremble.”

”Tell us, tell us!” cried Carcajou. ”One would think Wiesahkechack had come back from his Spirit Home where the Northern Lights grow.”

”*François has come!*” declared the Jay, in an even, dramatic voice.

The silence of consternation settled over the group.

”François and *The Boy!*” added Jack.

”What’s a Boy?” asked Lynx.

”I know,” asserted Mooswa. ”When I was a calf in the Company’s corral at Fort Resolution, I played with a Boy, the Factor’s Man-Cub. Great Horns! he was nice. Many a time he gave me to eat the queer grass things that grew in the Factor’s garden.”

”Where is François?” queried the King.

”At Red Stone Brook–he and The Boy. I had breakfast with them.”

”Renegade!” sneered Carcajou.

”And François says they will stay here all Winter and kill fur. There are three big Bear Traps in the outfit–I saw them, Muskwa; what think you? Great steel jaws to them, with hungry teeth. They would crack the leg of a Moose, even a Buffalo; and there are Number Four Traps for Umisk and Nekik; and smaller ones for you, Mister Marten–many of them. Oh, my! but it’s nice to have an eight-dollar coat. All the Thief-trappers in the land covet it.

”And François has an Ironstick, and The Boy has an Ironstick, and there will be great sport here all Winter. That’s what François said, and I think it is true–not that a Half-breed sticks to the truth over-close.”

The Hunt-fear settled over the gathering. No one had heart even to check the spiteful gibes of their feathered Clerk. The Law of the Boundaries, and the suspicious evidence of its violation that pointed to Lynx, were forgotten–which was, perhaps, a good thing for that unprincipled poacher.

Black King was first to break the fear-silence.

”Subjects, draw close, for already it has come to us that we have need of all our wisdom, and all our loyalty one to another, and the full strength of our laws.”

Silently they bunched up; then he proceeded:–

”François is a great Hunter. He has the cunning of Wolverine, the strength of Muskwa, the speed of mine own people, and the endurance of Mooswa. Be-

sides, there are the Traps, and the Ironstick; and Snares made from Deer-sinew and Cod-line. The soft strong cord which Man weaves. Also will this Evil Slayer, who is but a vile Half-breed, have the White Powder of Death in a tiny bottle–such a small bottle, and yet holding enough Devil-medicine to slay every Dweller in the Boundaries."

"That it will, Your Majesty," confirmed Jack; "and it kills while you breathe thrice–so, If-f-h, if-f-h, if-f-h! and you fall–your legs kick out stiff, and you are dead. I've seen it do its terrible work."

"Just so," assented Black King. "The use of that is against Man's law, even; but François cares not, so be it the Red-coats know not of its use. Now must we take an oath to help one the other, if we prefer not to have our coats nailed on the Hunt-Man's Shack walls, or stretched on the wedge-boards he uses for the hides of Otter, and Mink, and Fisher, and myself. Even Muskrat and Pisew go on a wedge-board when they are skinned. You, Beaver, and Muskwa, and Mooswa have your skins stretched by iron thorns on the side of a Shack.

"Now take we the oath?" he asked, looking from one to the other.

A murmur of eager assent started with the deep bass of Blue Wolf and died away in the plaintive treble of Wapoos.

"Then, listen and repeat with me," he commanded.

THE OATH OF THE BOUNDARIES.

"'We, Dwellers within the Boundaries, swear by the Spirit of Wiesahkechack, who is God of the Indians and all Animals, that, come Trap, come Ironstick, come White-powdered Bait, come Snare, come Arrow, come what soe'er may, we will help each other, and warn each other, and keep ward for each other; in the Star-time and the Sun-time, in the Flower-time and the Snow-time; that the call of one for help shall be the call of all; and the fight of one shall be the fight of all; and the enemy of one shall be the enemy of all.

"'By the Mark that is on the tail of each of us, we swear this. By the White Tip that is on the tail of Fox; by the Black Gloss that is on the tail of Marten; by the Perfume that is on the tail of Sikak; by the great, bushy tail of Blue Wolf, and the short tail of Bear; the broad, hairless tail of Beaver, and the strong tapered tail of Otter; by the Kink that is in the tail of Mink; by the much-haired tail of Fisher; the white Cotton-tail of Rabbit, the fawn-coloured tail of Mooswa, and the Bob-tail of Lynx; by the feathered tail of Whisky-Jack: and all others according to their Tail-mark, we swear it.'"

"Now," said Black King, "François will have his work cut out, for we are many against one."

"You forget The Boy, Your Majesty," interrupted Carcajou.

"Oh, he doesn't count," cried Jack, disdainfully. "He's a Moneas–which means a greenhorn. He's new to the Forest–has lived where the paths of Man are more plentiful than the Run-ways in Wapoos's Muskeg.

"Of course, personally, I don't mind their coming–like it; it means free food without far flying. Oh, but The Boy is a wasteful greenhorn. When he fried the white fat-meat, which is from the animal that dwells with Man, the Hog, he poured the juice out on the leaves, and the cold turned it into food like butter–white butter. Such rich living will make my voice soft. The Man-cub has a voice like mine–full of rich, sweet notes. Did any of you ever hear a Man or Man-cub sing 'Down upon the Suwanee River'? That's what The Boy sang this morning. But I don't know that river–it's not about here; and in my time I have flown far and wide over more broad streams than I have toes to my feet."

"Be still, empty-head!" cried the King, angrily. "You chatter as though the saving of our lives were good fun. Brother Carcajou, François needs no help. For five years he has followed me for my Black Coat–for five Winters I have eluded his Traps, and his Baits, and the cough of his Ironstick. But one never knows when the evil day is to come. Last Winter François trapped on Hay River. I was there; as you know, it is a great place for Black Currants."

"Do you eat the bitter, sour Berries, Your Majesty?" queried Marten.

"No, Silly; except for the flavour of them that is in the flesh of Gay Cock, the Pheasant. But it is in every child's book of the Fox tribe, that where Berries are thick, the Birds are many."

"How comes François here to the Pelican this year, then?" growled Blue Wolf.

"Because of the thing Men call Fate," answered Black King, learnedly; "though they do not understand the shape of it. We call it the Whisper of Wiesahkechack. Wiesahke whispered to me that because of the fire there were no Berries at Hay River, that the Birds had all come to the Pelican; and I have no doubt that He, who is the King of evil Mischief Makers, has also talked in thought-words to François, that here is much fur to be had for the killing."

"I should like to see François," exclaimed Nekik, the Otter.

"And The Boy!" suggested Mooswa. "It's years since I saw a Man-cub."

"W-h-e-u-f-f-!" ejaculated Muskwa. "I saw a Man once–Nichemous. Did I tell you about–"

"Save me from Owls!" interrupted Whisky-Jack; "that's your stock-story, old Squeaky Nose. I've heard it fifty times in the last two years."

The Bear stood rocking his big body back and forth while the saucy bird

chattered.

"But I should like to see more of Man," he continued, when Jay had finished. "Tell me, Jack, do they always walk on their hind-legs–or only when they are going to kill or fight–as I do? I think we must be cousins," he went on, meditatively.

"You ought to be ashamed of it, then!" snapped the Bird.

"They leave a trail just like mine," proceeded Muskwa, paying no attention to the Jay. "I once saw a Man's track on the mud bank of the river; I could have sworn it was one of my family had passed–a long foot-print with a heel."

"Perhaps it was your own track–you are so terribly stupid at times," suggested Jack.

"You might have made that mistake," retorted Muskwa, "for you can't scent; but when I investigated with my nose, I knew that it was Man. There was the same horrible smell that came to me once as two of these creatures passed down the river in a canoe, whilst I was eating Berries by the water's edge. But you spend most of your time begging a living from these Men, Jack–tell me if they generally walk as I do, on all fours?"

"Long ago they did, Muskwa; when their brains were small, like yours. Then they developed, and got more sense, and learned to balance themselves on their hind-legs."

"What's the use of having four legs and only using two?" grunted Bear, with a dissatisfied air.

"You'll find out, my Fat Friend, if you come within range of the Ironstick–what did Nichemous try to do? After that you won't ask silly questions, for François will take your skin, dry it in the sun, and put your brainless head on a tree as a Medicine Offering to the Hunt Spirit; and he'll take your big carcass home, and The Boy will help him eat it. Don't bother me about Man–if you want to know his ways, come and see for yourself."

"I'd like to, Clerk," answered Bear, humbly.

"They're going to build a house," asserted Whisky-Jack.

"A lodge!" exclaimed Beaver. "Oh, I must see that."

"What say you, Black King?" queried Carcajou. "May we all go to-morrow, and see this Trapper and The Boy–think you it's safe?"

"Better now than when the Traps are set and Firestick loaded."

So they arranged amongst themselves to go at dawn the next day, and watch from the bush François and Roderick.

Then the meeting broke up.

THE BUILDING OF THE SHACK

Next morning, just as the gray oncoming Day was rolling back into the Forest depths the Night curtain, Muskwa, who was swinging along leisurely, with a walk like a Blue-Jacket, towards the Trapper's Camp, discovered Wapoos sitting in his path.

"A snareless runway to you, Little Brother! Are you heading for the Shack?"

"Yes," bleated Wapoos; "I'm still weak from the Seventh Year sickness, and hop badly, I fear."

"Jump up, Afflicted One, your furry stomach will feel warm on my back,–Huh! huh! this beastly fog that comes up from the waters of the Athabasca to battle with the sunlight gets into my lungs. I shall soon have to creep into a warm nest for my long sleep."

"Hast seen any of our Comrades?" queried Wapoos, as he lay in the velvet cushion of black fur that was a good four inches deep on Bear's back.

"I heard Rof's hoarse bay as he called across the Pelican to some one. Here is Nekik's trail, where his belly has scraped all the mud spots."

"Aren't we a funny lot?" giggled Wapoos. "Mooswa's legs are like the posts of Man's cache–so long; and Otter's are like the knots on a tree–too short. See! there goes Black King and his red-headed Mother."

"That is the queerest outfit in the Boundaries," chuckled Muskwa. "The Widow is red, and three of the Sons; the Babe, Stripes, is brown, with a dark cross on his back; while the King is as black as my Daddy was. Sweet Honey! but his coat was beautiful–like the inside of a hole on a pitch-dark night. There is a family of Half-breeds up at The Landing just like the Widow's lot. Some are red-haired, some are brown, and some are black. I saw them once Fishing at Duck Lake."

"Did they see you, Muskwa?"

"Am I not here, Little Brother–therefore their eyes were busy with the Fish. Wu-u-f-f! I catch the scent of Man. Jump down, Wapoos; push through the Willows and tell me what thou seest."

Bear sat on his haunches and waited.

"There's a white lodge," reported Rabbit, as he hopped back, "and inside is

a throat-call that is not of our Comrades."

"That's Man's tepee; most like it was The Boy's song your big ears heard."

They went forward gingerly, Wapoos acting as pilot. In a little open space where Red Stone Brook emptied into the Athabasca was a small "A" tent. The two comrades lay down in the willows to watch. Soon they were joined by Black King; Otter was already there. Then came Blue Wolf and Mooswa. As Carcajou joined them, Whisky-Jack fluttered into the centre of the party.

"That's a Tent," he said, with the air of a courier explaining sights to a party of tourists. "The Boy is putting on his fur. Do you hear his song-cry?"

"He hath a full stomach," growled Rof, "for his voice is rich in content. What is the cry, Bird of Knowledge?"

"It's a song of my Crow Cousins. I'll repeat a line for your fur-filled ears:–

"'There were three crows sat on a tree,
And they were black as crows could be;
Said one of them unto his mate,
Let's catch old Carcajou to ate!'"

"All of a kind flock together," retorted Wolverine; "Birds, and Boys, and Fools!"

Jack chuckled. To have roused Carcajou's anger was something to start the day with.

"Plenty of Water to you all, Comrades," greeted Beaver pleasantly, patting a smooth seat for himself with his tail, as he joined the others.

"Where is the Man?" queried Black King.

"Sleeping!" answered Jack. "He makes a noise with his nose like fat Muskwa does when he runs from Grizzly."

"That's a pretty lodge," remarked Beaver, critically. "When will they flood it?"

"Stupid! they don't live in water," reproved Jay. "If it is wet they make a little hollow path and run the water off."

"Is that a Dead-fall, Jack?" asked Muskwa, pointing his gray nozzle at a small square building that was three logs high.

"It's their Shack; they started it yesterday."

"A poor Lodge!" declared Umisk. "The first flood will undermine the corners, and down it will come. Have they no trowel-tails to round it up with good blue-clay?"

"Umisk, you should travel. Your ideas are limited. Have they not built their Shack on high ground where there will be no flood?"

"But they'll freeze in the Winter," persisted Beaver. "The water would keep

them warm if they flooded it."

"They've got a stove," the Courier answered.

"What's a stove?" asked Lynx.

"You'll find out, Mister Cat, when they make bouillon of your ribs. It's that iron-thing with one long ear."

"Is that their breakfast–that pile of wood-meat?" queried Beaver.

"Yes, meat for the stove," piped Jack. "Do you think they have teeth like a wood-axe and eat bark because you do?"

"They have queer teeth, sure enough," retorted Trowel Tail. "See this tree stump, cut flat from two sides, all full of notches, as though a Kit-Beaver who didn't know his business had nibbled it down. How in the name of Good Dams they can fell trees into a stream that way I can't make out. This tree fell on land and they had to carry the logs. They're silly creatures and have much to learn."

"There's The Boy!" whispered Jack, nudging Muskwa in the ribs with his wing.

They all peered eagerly at the door of the tent, for a white-skinned hand was unlacing it. Then a fair face, with rosy cheeks, topped by a mass of yellow hair, was thrust through the opening, and presently a lad of fourteen stepped out, stretched his arms upward, and commenced whistling like a bird.

"That's the Boy-call," said Black King, in a soft voice. "Listen, Comrades, so that we may know it. François gives voice to the Man-call: 'Hi, yi! hi, yi! E-e-e-g-o-o-o-!' which means, in their talk, 'Hear! hear! it is I–I–A Man!' That is because they claim to be Lords of all the Animal Kingdom, even as I am Ruler in our own Boundaries."

"What a lovely Pup!" cried the Red Widow, enthusiastically; "he's got yellow hair just like my Babe–look, Stripes! Plump Birds! but I wish I had him in my litter."

"'Pup,' indeed!" exclaimed Whisky-Jack, indignantly. "A Man-Boy called 'Pup,' by a frowsy old Fox Widow."

"Clerk!" interrupted Black King, angrily.

"François! François!" called The Boy, putting his face inside the tent; "the sun is up, the fog is gone, and I'm as hungry as a Wolf."

Rof started. "Gur-r-r-! how does the Cub know my stomach is lean because of the Seventh Year famine?"

A pair of sharp, black eyes gleamed from the tent flap. They belonged to the Half-breed Trapper, François.

"Move back, Brothers, a little into the Willows," whispered Black King; "he has Devil-eyes, like Wolverine."

"His Majesty flatters you, Carcajou," sneered Whisky-Jack.

François came out, took his axe, and made some shavings from a Jack-pine

stick.

”Will they eat that?” asked Beaver.

The Breed stepped over to a Birch tree, peeled from its side a handful of silver, ribbon-like bark, and lighted it with a match; it blazed and crackled like oil-soaked shavings. Then he shoved it into the stove, put chips and three sticks of wood in, shut the door, and thick black smoke curled up from the stove pipe. The animals stared with extraordinary interest.

Whisky-Jack craned his head, and watched the effect of this magic on his Comrades.

”That’s the Devil-thing that destroyed all the Birds and their Eggs,” said the Red Widow. ”It’s the Man-fire.”

Blue Wolf was trembling. ”E-u-h! E-u-h!” he whined; ”Man’s Fire-medicine. It grows like the wind, and destroys like the Rabbit plague. Once seven Brothers of mine stalked a Man and he started this Fire-medicine.”

”What happened, Rof?” asked Carcajou.

”The Man escaped.”

”And your Seven Brothers?”

”This red-poison ate them as Otter devours a Fish–bones and all.”

”I think the stove is a good thing,” decided Black King. ”The Man-fire is in a Trap.”

”Yes, the Fire-trap is a good thing,” concurred his Mother, ”if we wish to save the Birds.”

”And the Rabbits!” added Lynx.

”And the Berries!” grunted Muskwa.

”The purple Moose-weed grows after fire has eaten the Forest,” mused Mooswa; ”and if it glows hot and red on one river bank I swim to the other.”

”It’s all right for you, Long-legs, Pudding-nose, Bob-tail,” gibed Whisky-Jack; ”but the Law of the Boundaries is for the good of all, and this Fire-trap is a fine thing. I hate to have hot coals falling on my feathers, when the Forest is on fire.”

The smoke curled lazily riverward, away from the animals. Suddenly it veered about and the pungent perfume of burning Birch-bark came toward them.

Mooswa straightened his massive head, spread the nostrils of his great cushion-shaped nose, cocked his thick ears forward intently, and discriminated between the different scents that came floating on the sleepy morning air.

”The fire breath–Wh-e-e!” It tickled a cough in his throat. ”The odour of the Half-breed,” ugh! he knew that–it was the Man-smell. ”But stop! What?” A something out of the long ago crept into his sensitive nostrils and touched his memory. Surely once it had been familiar.

The Boy crossed directly in the wind’s path, and Mooswa got it stronger.

Then he knew. His big eyes glistened softly, eagerly; it was the scent of the Lad he had played with in his youth.

"Comrades," he gurgled, for something was in his throat, "have I not told you of the Boy who was the Factor's Young?"

"Whenever you got a chance!" snapped Whisky-Jack.

Mooswa sighed wearily. Jack's frivolity was tiring to his sedate mind.

"Well, that's my Boy there. I'd like to rub my nose against his rose-flowered cheek."

"While François tickled your lean ribs with the Firestick!" jeered the Bird.

"Bring a pot of water," said François to his comrade, "while I cut up the fish."

"Great Suckers!" exclaimed Nekik; "Fish! and a beauty, too. It's a Tulabie. I know them; they're first cousin to White-fish. These men have fine taste–a fish diet makes one clever."

"It does!" declared Mink.

"It's better than roots!" concurred Muskrat.

"Slow Birds! it makes me hungry," sighed the Red Widow.

"So it does me, Good Dame," piped Whisky-Jack. "You chaps had better slip away home now; I'm going to breakfast with the Men. It isn't safe to remain, for I can't stop to look after you."

"Go and clear the plates, Feather-front," cried Carcajou, malignantly.

Jack sawed the air energetically with his wings and lighted on the wire guy with which François had steadied the stove pipe.

"Shall we move, Comrades?" asked Black King.

"Wait and see how Jack gets on with The Boy," pleaded Mooswa.

"I could sit here and smell that Fish all day," declared Nekik.

"So could I," added Mink. "It's just lovely. I've never tasted Fish dried in the fire-pot. Once I stole one from a Trapper which he had dried in the sun–there was no juice in it."

"Pe-e-p! Peep!" squeaked Whisky-Jack. The Boy looked up at him.

"What a frowsy-headed old bird!" he exclaimed, shying a stick at Jay.

Muskwa dug Mooswa in the ribs with his big paw. "We'll see fun yet if we wait," he chuckled thickly.

"Don't bodder 'bout dat fell'," remonstrated François; "dat's only Whisky-Jack."

"Only what?" asked the lad.

"What dey call Canadienne Jay–Whisky-Jack."

"Shall I shoot him?"

"No; dat fell' no good, but he's not wort' de powder an' s'ot."

Jack heard a faint giggle come up from the gray willows, for Wolverine had his big-clawed fist half-way down his throat to choke the sound of laughter.

”Our Clerk’s Men Friends are complimentary,” remarked Black King.

The Boy cut a small piece of fat pork, stuck it on a sharp stick, and busied himself somewhat at the stove front; but the watchers could not quite see what he was doing.

”I think I’ll give Jay some breakfast,” he said suddenly; ”the bird seems hungry:” and straightening his back, threw towards him the lump of pork.

With a pleased chuckle Jack swooped down and drove his beak into the white mass like a lance. Then he went through a rare set of gymnastic contortions, for the wicked Boy had heated the pork scalding hot. Jack clawed at it with his feet and burnt his toes–his tongue was blistered.

”What’s that noise?” exclaimed Rod, for a distinct muffled laugh had escaped from the band of animals.

”It’s de float-ice groundin’ on de ribber-banks, I tink me,” answered François, cocking his head sideways to listen.

As the animals slipped away in alarm, Jack came fluffing after them, and perched himself indignantly on Mooswa’s great antlers.

”O my Giant Brother!” he cried furiously, ”come and kill that debased Man-Cub, I beg you.”

The Moose’s shaggy sides were heaving with suppressed laughter. ”What has he done, Sweet Bird?” he moaned.

”Taken the skin off my toes, and blistered my tongue with his accursed fat pork.”

”Why don’t you wear boots as I do, and not knock around barefooted? I should be always jamming my toes if I hadn’t these thick boots. Why, last year when the big fire was on, I went through miles of burning country, and except a little hardening up of the soles, there was no harm done.”

”But you don’t wear them on your tongue, do you?” asked the Bird, crossly.

”No, Silent One, I don’t–neither do you; but if you’ll just wrap it up for a few days and give it a rest, I’m sure it will be all right.”

”Do,” cried Carcajou; ”we sha’n’t mind. I suppose that’s what The Boy calls his Tongue Trap–he knew whom to set it for, too.”

”Come and trample him with your sharp hoofs, dear Mooswa,” pleaded Whisky-Jack, the lack of sympathy and the chaff making him furious.

”Oh, sit still, if you’re going to ride on my horns,” exclaimed the Bull. ”You’re jigging about–”

”As though he had corns,” interrupted Carcajou.

”It was so nice of you, Whisky-Jack,” said Lynx, in an oily tone, ”to take care of us all while we were there–wasn’t it? Some of us might have burned our tongues but for you destroying the hot Bait.”

When the animals got back to their meeting-place, which was known as

the Boundary Centre, they stopped for a time to compare notes.

"Comrades," said Mooswa, "little have I claimed from you. I kill not anything; neither the Fox Cubs, nor the Sons of Umisk, nor the red-tailed Birds that beat their wings like drums, nor anything. But this new law I ask of you all in the face of the King; for the Boy that was my Man-brother, the safeguard of the Boundaries."

"You have not had the hot-meat thrust in your throat, friend of the rascally Cub," objected Jack, angrily.

"Hush, Chatterer!" growled Bear; "let Mooswa speak."

"The horn-crowned Lord of the Forest gives expression to a noble sentiment," declared Pisew. "By all means let the Kit-Man grow free of the Boundary Fear, until his claws are long and his bone-cracking teeth are strong."

"He must have a Mother also," said the Red-Widow softly. "You have all forsworn malice to my Babe, Stripes, until he is of full strength–let the Man-Cub have the same guard."

"What about François?" objected Whisky-Jack. "By my Stone-crop I'll wager he taught that Chick the trick of the hot pork."

"For him," continued Mooswa, gravely, "in defence of our rights and our lives the full law of the Forest; by night, the lone road and the cry of Blue Wolf and his Brothers; by day, the strong clasp of Muskwa; at close quarters, the stamp of my hoofs; and for his Traps and their Bait, the cunning of Carcajou and Black King."

"This is fair–it is a good Law," said Black Fox.

"It is!" they all cried in chorus.

"I am satisfied!" added the Moose.

"I think it would be well, Subjects," said Black King, thoughtfully, "to watch this Man and Man-Cub until the setting out of the Traps; after that we can regulate our lives in accordance. How long will it take them to build their Shack, Clerk?"

"Four days, François told The Boy last evening, as he smoked the scent-flower."

"Then on the fourth day, three or four of us who are quick travellers had better go and watch the evil ways of this Slayer. What say you all?"

"Most wise King," exclaimed Pisew, "select thou the Strong Runners."

"Very well: Mooswa, Muskwa, Rof, and myself–also Carcajou, for he has great knowledge of Man the Killer's ways."

"I should like to see the lodge when it is finished," whined Beaver, "but my short little fore-legs travel not overfast on land."

"So you shall, Comrade," growled Muskwa; "You may ride on my back."

"Or on my antlers," suggested Mooswa; "their bowl will be like a cradle for

you."

"That's settled, then," declared Black Fox. "On the fourth round of the Sun we meet at François's Shack, in the safety time of the Forest, dawn hour; either that or dusk hour. What say you Brothers–which shall it be?"

"It would suit me better on account of my work," ventured Umisk, "to go at dusk hour. I have lost much time lately, and I'm building new lodges for my three-year-old Sons who are starting out for themselves this Fall."

"Don't be late, then–I go to bed at dusk," lisped Whisky-Jack, mincingly, for his tongue was wondrous sore. "I will take note of what the Men do in the meantime."

"And take care of us, O Wise Bird," sneered Pisew.

"Big-feet! Spear-ear! Herring-waist!" fairly screamed Jay, forgetting the sore tongue in his rage. "Before Winter is over, you'll be glad of Jack's advice, or I don't know François."

"The white of a Partridge egg is good for a burn," retorted Lynx. "Find one and cool your fevered tongue."

"Are not these wranglers just like Men, Carcajou?" remarked Mooswa. "If you all spent more time in lawful hunt for food you would be fatter. It will profit me more to browse in the Forest than listen to your frost-singed wit, so I leave you, Comrades."

"And I prefer even fat Frogs to hot fat Pork," said Pisew, maliciously, slinking like a shadow into the woods.

"'Fat Frogs,'" sneered Carcajou; "good enough for that smooth-faced Sneak–I hardly know what I'm going to have for dinner, though."

"Fat Birds are the thing to tickle my appetite," declared Black King. "It is coming the time of day for them to shove their heads under wing, too. I'm off–remember we meet on the Fourth day."

THE EXPLORATION OF CARCAJOU

At sunset on the Fourth day Black King and his party once more crouched in the willows at Red Stone Brook. François and his young friend were just putting some finishing touches to the Shack roof–placing the last earth sods on top of the poles, for it was a mud covering.

"It's nearly finished," whispered Jay.

”Strong Teeth! but that is funny,” laughed Beaver.

”What is funny, Eater of Wood?” queried Jack.

”Why, the Man carries his trowel-tail in his front paws. I wish I could do that. I have to turn around to look when I’m doing a nice bit of plastering.”

It was the Half-breed’s spade that had drawn forth this remark.

”Yes,” declared Whisky-Jack wisely, ”one time the Men were like you–walked on four legs and used a trowel-tail for their building; now they stand upright, and have shed the trowel which they use in their hands.”

”Wonderful!” soliloquized Umisk; ”still they can’t do as good work. Fat Poplar! but it’s a poor Lodge. The only sensible thing about it is the mud roof.”

François struck the clod sharply with his spade, settling it into place. ”How clumsily the Man works,” cried Beaver; ”I’m glad my tail is where it is. What’s that mud thing sticking up out of the corner, Jay? Is it a little lodge for the Kit-Man?”

”That’s a chimney–part of the fire-trap,” answered Jack.

”I know what that’s like,” asserted Carcajou. ”I went down one once. The Trapper locked his door, thinking to keep me out while he rounded up his Traps. It’s a splendid trail for getting in and out of a Shack. Why, I can carry a side of bacon up that hole–did it.”

”Isn’t The Boy lovely?” muttered Mooswa. ”Isn’t his call sweet? What does François name him, Jack–Man-Cub or Kit-Man?”

Just then the Half-breed sang out: ”Rod, I t’ink me it’s grub time–knock off. De ole s’ack s’e’s finis’.”

”Rod?” mused the Moose. ”Yes, that is what the Factor used to call him. ’Rod! Rod!’ he would shout, and The Boy would run with his little fat legs.”

Rod and the Half-breed went inside, closed the door and lighted a candle, for it was growing dark, put a fire in the stove and cooked their supper.

The watchers, eager to see everything, edged cautiously up to the log walls. Space for a small window had been left by the builders, but the sash was not yet in place.

”I should like to see that mud-work the Man did with his hand-trowel,” whispered Umisk.

”Climb on my horns, Little Brother,” said Mooswa, softly, ”and I will lift you up.”

Beaver slipped around gently on the roof inspecting François’s handicraft, while the others listened at the window.

”By Goss! Rod,” said the Breed, ”I put me leetle fire in de fire-place for dry dat c’imney, s’e’s sof. De fros’ spoil him when s’e’s no dry.”

”I believe they have made the chimney too small,” muttered Carcajou. ”I’m going up to have a look.”

”To-mor’ we put out dat Traps,” remarked the Half-breed. ”What you t’ink, Boy–I see me dat Black Fox yesterday.”

”The Black Fox!” exclaimed his young companion, eagerly. ”The beauty you spoke of as being in this part of the country?”

The King trembled. Already this terrible Trapper was on his trail.

”Yes; I know me where he have hes hole. I put dat number t’ree Otter Trap close by, cover him wit’ leaves, an’ put de fis’-head bait on top. Den we see. We keel plenty fur here dis Winter. Dere’s big moose track too–mus’ be bull.”

Black King scratched Mooswa’s fore-leg with a paw to draw his attention, but the latter had heard.

”I make some snare to-night, an’ put him out wit’ Castoreum. Dere’s plenty Cat here.”

Lynx shuddered.

”We must help each other,” he whined, in a frightened voice.

Mooswa felt a little pat on his lofty horn, and looked up. ”Lift me down, Brother,” whispered Beaver.

”Where’s Carcajou?” queried the King.

”Poking around the chimney–he made me nervous.

”Wuf!” sniffed Muskwa, gently. ”Our Man burns the stink-weed in his mouth–it’s horrible!” François was smoking.

[image]

”WUF!” SNIFFED MUSKWA, GENTLY. ”OUR MAN BURNS THE STINK-WEED IN HIS MOUTH.”

Carcajou was busy examining the mud-and-stick wall of the chimney, which stuck up three feet above the roof. ”I’m sure they’ve made it too small,” he muttered; ”I’ll never be able to get down. That will be too bad. By my Cunning! but I’d like to know for sure–I will!” For nothing on earth will satisfy a Wolverine’s curiosity but complete investigation.

He gave a spring, grabbed the top of the chimney with his strong fore-legs, and pulled himself up. As he did so the soft mud collapsed and sank with a tremendous crash through the hole in the roof, carrying the reckless animal with it.

”Run for it!” commanded Black King, sharply; ”that mischievous Devil has made a mess of the business.”

”Whif! Wuf! Whiff!” grunted Bear, plunging through the thicket.

Black Fox melted silently into the Forest darkness as swiftly as a cloud-

shadow crosses a sunlit plain.

Lynx gathered his sinewy legs and fairly spurned the earth in far-reaching bounds.

Beaver had been sitting curled up in the bowl of Mooswa's antlers, peeping in the window at the time of Carcajou's mishap. His quick brain took in the situation. Grasping the two strong front points, he squeaked, "Fly, Mooswa!"

"Sit tight, Little Brother!" admonished the Moose, putting his nose straight out and laying the horn-crown back over his withers, as he rushed with a peculiar side-wheel action, like a pacing-horse, from the clearing.

When the crash came François jumped to his feet in amazement. Before he could investigate the mass of mud upheaved, a small dark-brown body scuttled across the floor, clattered up the wall, and vanished through the open window.

The Breed jumped for the door, grabbing a gun as he went. Throwing it open he rushed out, but of course there was nothing in sight. Wolverine was busily engaged in working his short legs to their full capacity in an earnest endeavour to place considerable territory between himself and the treacherous Shack.

François came back grunting his dissatisfaction.

Rod stood in speechless amazement while his companion examined the pile of soft mud débris critically by the aid of a candle.

"I t'ought me dat!" he remarked, with satisfied conviction, straightening his back and setting the candle down on the rude plank table. "It's dat Debil of de Woods, Carcajou. Wait you, Mister Wolverine; François s'ow you some treek."

"What was he after?" queried The Boy.

"After for raise Ole Nick," declared the Half-breed, dejectedly. "You know what we mus' do? We mus' ketc' dat debil firs', or we keel no fur here. He steal de bait, an' cac'e de Trap; s'pose we go out from de S'ack, dat Carcajou come down de c'imney, tear up de clo'es, spill de farina–de flour, t'row de pot in de ribber, an' do ever' fool t'ing what you can t'ink. Never mind, I ketc' him, an' I keel him;" and François fairly danced a Red River jig in his rage.

Whisky-Jack had perched on the end of a roof-plate log when the trouble materialized, so he heard this tirade against Wolverine. The Bird could hardly go to sleep for chuckling. What a sweet revenge he would have next day; how he would revile Wolverine. Surely the unfortunate Carcajou had scorched his feet, and mayhap his back, when he fell in the fire-place. "I wonder whose toes are sore to-night," the Jay thought. "I hope he got a good singeing–meddling beast! Nice Lieutenant to upset everything just when we were having such a lovely

time. Oh, but I'll rub it into him to-morrow."

THE SETTING OUT OF THE TRAPS

"Royal Son," said the Red Widow next morning, "what is the Burrow of the Men-Kind like?"

"Ask Carcajou when he comes, Mother," replied Black Fox; and he related the incident of the night before.

"Art sure, Son, that the Kit-Man's Mother is not with him?"

"No, Dame, she is not."

"Then he will get into trouble–that is certain. I have looked after you all–a big family, too, nine of you–and know what it means. Pisew, with his cannibal taste for Fox-cubs–and mark this, Son, even Carcajou has a weakness the same way, my Mother taught me to understand. And Rof, who seems such a big, gruff, kind-hearted fellow, would crack one of your backs with his great jaws quick enough in the Hunger-year, were no one looking. Mooswa is honest, but the others bear him no love, surely. And François is to set out the Traps to-day, and he has discovered our home here in this cut-bank, you say. Well, Son, thou art the King, because of thy Wisdom; but together we must advise against this Slayer, who has the cunning of Carcajou and the Man-knowledge of Wiesahkechack."

"What shall we do, Dame?"

"Now, thy red Brother, Speed, must take the message to the strong runners of our Comrades, Mooswa and the others, as has been arranged, to meet; and when François has passed with the Traps, go you five after this Man, and gain knowledge of where they are placed, and do all things necessary for safety in the Boundaries. The Watcher over Animals has sent soft snow last night, the first of this Cold-time, so your task will be easy. Just the length of a brisk run, higher up the Pelican, is a cut-bank with a hole as good as this. Before you were born, with your beautiful silver coat, I lived there.

"Now, François, even as he told the Man-Cub, will trap here, and who knows but he may put his Fire-medicine with its poison breath in the door of our Burrow, and seek to drive us out to be killed."

"That is true, Most Wise Mother; the sight of the twisting red-poison is more dreadful than anything; for it smothers and eats up, and is swift as the wind, and spreads like the flood in the river, and fears neither Man nor Beast,

and obeys not even the Spirit God of the Animals when it is angered."

"Well, Son, while you follow the trail of this evil Trapper, I, with all your Brothers, will go to the other Burrow."

"Be sure the Cubs step all in one track, Mother–your track, so this Breed Man, with his sharp eyes, shall not suspect."

"Do you hear, Cubs?" asked the Widow. "Remember what your Brother has said. Also each day one of us will make a fresh trail here, so that the Man may think we still live in this house."

So while Speed glided swiftly through the Boundaries uttering his whimper call to Mooswa, Muskwa, Rof, and Carcajou, François and Rod shouldered each a bag of Traps and started to lay out the Marten Road, as was called a big circle of Traps extending perhaps thirty miles, for the Winter's hunt.

The Boy was filled with eager, joyous anticipation. During his school days in town he had thought and dreamed of the adventurous free life of a Fur Trapper in the great Spruce Forests of the North. That was chiefly because it was bred in the bone with him. He threw back to the forty years of his father's Factor-life as truly as an Indian retains the wild instinct of his forefathers, though he delve for half a lifetime in the civilization of the White Man.

"Here is de Marten tracks," cried François, stopping suddenly; and with precise celerity he built a little converging stockade by placing in the ground sharp-pointed sticks. In this he set a small steel Trap, covered it with leaves, and beyond placed the head of a fish.

"What's that track?" asked The Boy, as his companion stopped and looked at the trail of some big-footed creature.

"Cat," answered François; "dat's Mister Lynk. He like for smell some t'ing, so I give him Castoreum me for rub on hes nose–perhaps some necktie too."

[image]

"CAT," ANSWERED FRANÇOIS; "DAT'S MISTER LYNK."

He cut a stick four feet long and four inches thick, and to the middle of it fastened a running noose made from cod-line. Then building a stockade similar to the last, and placing a fish-head smeared with Castoreum inside, he bent down a small Poplar and from it suspended the noose covering the entrance to the stockade.

"Now, Mister Lynk he go for smell dat," explained François. "He put hes fat head t'rough dat noose; perhaps he don't get him out no more. By Goss! he silly; when dat string get tight he fight wid de stick, an' jump, and play de fool.

De stick don't say not'ing, but jump too, of course, cause it loose, you see. If de stick be fas' den de Lynk break de string; but dis way dey fight, an' by an' by dat Lynk he dead for soor, I t'ink me."

"He has queer taste," said The Boy, "to risk his neck for that stuff–it's worse than a Skunk."

They moved on, and behind, quite out of sight, but examining each contrivance of the Trapper, came Black Fox, Muskwa, Blue Wolf, Mooswa, and Carcajou. Whisky-Jack was with them; now flying ahead to discover where the enemy were, now fluttering back with a dismal "Pee weep! Pee weep!" to report and rail at things generally.

Carcajou at times travelled on three legs. "Got a thorn in your foot?" queried the Jay? solicitously.

"Toes are cold," answered Wolverine, shortly.

"He-a-weep!" laughed Whisky-Jack, sneeringly; "they were hot enough last night, when you called on François through the chimney. Whose toes are sore to-day, Mister Carcajou? And the fur is burnt off your back–excuse me while I laugh;" and the Bird gave vent to a harsh, cackling chuckle.

"Hello!" Carcajou exclaimed, suddenly. "I smell Castoreum; or is it Sikak the Skunk?"

When they came to the Lynx Snare, almost immediately, he circled around gingerly in the snow, examining every bush, and stick, and semblance of track; then he peered into the little stockade. "It's all right!" he declared; "that François is a double-dealing Breed. I have known him set a Snare like this for Pisew, and a little to one side put a Number Four Steel Trap, nicely covered up, to catch an unsuspicious, simple-minded Wolverine."

"Why don't you also say *honest, modest*, Wolverine?" derided Whisky-Jack.

"But that's a Snare for Pisew, right enough," continued Carcajou.

"It is!" added Black Fox.

"Watch me spring it!" commanded Carcajou, tearing with his strong jaws and stronger feet at the fastening which held down the bent poplar. Swish! And the freed sapling shot into the air, dangling the cord like a hangman's noose invitingly before their eyes. "Now if any one wants the Fish-head, he may have it," he added.

"Not with Castoreum Sauce," said Black Fox. Even Blue Wolf turned his nose up at it.

"Well, I'll eat it myself," bravely remarked Wolverine, "for I'm hungry."

"You always are, 'Gulo the Glutton,' as Men call you," twittered Jay.

"I don't care for hot pork, though," retorted the other, making a grimace at the Bird.

"I believe they are heading for your house, Black Fox," remarked Rof, as

they trudged on again.

"François is setting a Trap in the King's Palace–in the Court Yard," cried Whisky-Jack, fluttering back to meet them. Sure enough, as the friends crouched in a little coulee they could see the Half-breed covering up a "No. 3" directly in front of Fox's hole. Near the Trap François deposited two pieces of meat.

"If the Old Lady comes out she'll get her toes pinched," remarked Carcajou.

Black Fox laughed. "When François catches Mother, we all shall be very dead."

When the Trapper had gone, the Comrades drew close, and gingerly reconnoitred. "Only one Trap!" cried Carcajou; "this is too easy." Cautiously fishing about in the snow he found a chain; pulling the Trap out, he gave it a yank–something touched the centre-plate, and it went off with a vicious snap that made their hearts jump.

"Is the Bait all right, Whisky-Jack," asked Black King. "Was there any talk of White Powder?"

"There's nothing in it," replied the Bird; "I saw them cut the Meat."

"Well, Jack and I will eat one piece; there's a piece for you, Rof. In this year of scarce food even the Death Bait is acceptable–though it's but a tooth-full. Are you hungry, Muskwa?"

"No; I am sleepy. I think I'll go to bed to-morrow for all Winter. You fellows have kept me up too late now."

"Give me a paw to break the ice in the stream, Muskwa–I'm going to cache this Trap," said Carcajou.

"All right," yawned Bear; "I can hardly keep my eyes open. I'm afraid my liver is out of order."

"Shouldn't eat so much," piped Whisky-Jack.

Muskwa slouched down to the river; Wolverine grabbed up the Trap in his strong jaws and followed. Bruin scraped the snow to one side deftly, uncovering a patch of the young ice, and two or three powerful blows from his mighty paw soon shivered a hole in it. Carcajou dropped the Trap through, saying, "It will close over to-night, and to-morrow perhaps the wind will cover it with snow."

The King looked on admiringly.

"Bra-vo! br-a-a-vo!" growled Blue Wolf. "I might have put my foot in that when I came to visit the Widow."

And so all day the conspirators followed François and The Boy, undoing their work.

To Muskwa's horror, near the nest he had prepared for his long Winter's rest they found a huge Bear Trap. At sight of its yawning jaws drops of perspiration dripped from Bruin's tongue. "Sweet Sleep! what should I do if I were to put a leg in that awful thing–it would crack the bone, I believe. Who in the name

of Forest Fools told François where my house was?"

"Whisky-Jack, likely," snapped Carcajou, malignantly.

"Not I," declared Jay–"I swear it! I keep the Law. What evil I've got to say of any one, I say to his face; I'm no traitor. You're a thief, Carcajou–your ears were cut off for stealing! Your head's as smooth as a Bird's egg, and you're a quarrelsome Blackguard–but did I ever accuse you of betraying our Comrades?"

"Never mind, Sweet Singer," answered Wolverine, apologetically, "I didn't mean it. Nobody told François; it was your own big feet, Muskwa. If you weren't half asleep you'd know that you left a trail like the passing of Train Dogs."

"How shall we spring the Trap?" asked Bear.

"Don't touch it," commanded Carcajou. "Just leave it, and François will spend many days waiting for your thick fur."

"But if I 'hole-up' here the Man will break into my house and kill me while I sleep."

"How can he find you?" asked Jack, incredulously. "It's going to snow again, you'll be all covered up deep and he'll never know where you are."

"Won't he, Little Brother? Man is not so stupid. How do you suppose I breathe? There'll be a little hole right up through the snow, all yellow about the edges, and François will find that; also, if there's frost in the air, see my breath. No; I've got to make another nest now. I should have turned in before the snow fell, then I'd have been all right."

"We'll help you fix a new house," said Black King; "but you had better wait–perhaps this snow will go away; then there will be no tracks to lead Trappers to your nest. It is really too bad to keep you up when you are so sleepy, but it's the only way."

"And to think how I worked over it," lamented Muskwa. "For a week I carried sticks until my arms ached; and scraped up leaves, and spruce boughs, and soft moss, until my hands were sore. It would have been the finest 'hole-up' of any Bear within the Boundaries. Umisk boasts about his old Mud Lodge, with the lower floor all flooded with water–it's enough to give one rheumatism. New Ant Hills! I shouldn't like to live in a cold, cheerless place like that. If I had just pulled all that nice warm covering over me before the snow fell, I should have been as comfortable as little Gopher in his hole. It's too bad!"

"I'll tell you what we will do, Muskwa," said Black King; "we'll ask the Old Lady about this thing. You wouldn't mind a nice dry hole in a cut-bank somewhere, would you–if the snow lasts and you can't make another nest? She knows all the empty houses from Athabasca to Peel River. I am in the same fix myself, for the family are moving to-day–though we have lived in our present quarters for a matter of four years."

"That's a King for you!" cried Whisky-Jack. "He's like a Father to us," con-

curred Blue Wolf.

”Now we’ll go back,” ordered Black Fox; ”the Man has set all his Traps. See! here’s the mark of an empty bag on the snow. If you discover anything new, come to the big dead Cottonwood–the one that was struck by storm-fire–at Two Rapids, and give the Boundary Call. I don’t want you making a trail up to our new house for François to follow.”

THE OTTER SLIDE

For the next few days François was busy completing his Marten Road, quite unconscious of the undoing that followed him. Fifteen miles out he constructed a small rest-house that would do for a night’s camping; thus he could go the round of his Traps nicely in two days. The People of the Boundaries watched him, and where they found a Trap, sprang it and stole the Bait. He fixed up the chimney that had suffered from Carcajou’s diabolical curiosity. Winter had properly set in; streams were frozen up, the ground covered with snow, and the days were of scarce more length than a long drawn out forenoon. Affairs were in this state when one morning the Red Widow heard Beaver’s plaintive whistle from the Cottonwood.

”Son,” she cried to Black Fox, ”Umisk calls; something has gone wrong in the Forest.” The King turned over, stretched his sinewy legs, and yawned; the sharp-pointed, blood-red tongue curled against the roof of his mouth, and the strong teeth gleamed white against the background of his lacquer coat. It was a full-drawn, lazy protest against being roused from slumber, for a brace of Pin-tail Grouse lying in the corner of his cave gave evidence of much energy during the previous night.

”Bother this being King!” he yapped crabbedly. ”To take care of one’s own relatives is trouble enough. By the Howl of a Hungry Wolf! I saved Stripes from a Trap yesterday–just in the nick of time to keep him from grabbing the Bait. Now Trowel Tail is after me. This place was bad enough when there were only Animals here–I mean Animals of our own knowing, Mother; now that this other kind of Animal, Man, has come, it’s simply awful. They must be a bad lot, these Men. We fear Wolf when he is hungry, and Muskwa when there are no Berries, but Man is always crying, ’E-go, Kil-l–Kil-l!’”

Again Umisk’s shrill little treble cut the keen frosty air. ”Hurry, Lad!” cried

the Widow; ”likely his family is in trouble.”

Black Fox stuck his head cautiously from the entrance to their Burrow, and peered through the massive drapery of Birch-tree roots which completely veiled that part of the cut-bank. ”Mother,” he said, ”make the Boys use the log-path when they’re coming home, or François will hole us up one of these fine days.”

”I have told them, Son; your two Brothers were cross-hatching the trail all yesterday afternoon. There are three blind holes within five miles up the stream, and to each one they have made a nice little false trail to amuse this Stealer of Skins.”

”That’s all right, Mother; we can’t be too careful.”

He stretched each hind-leg far out, throwing his head high to loosen the neck-muscles and expand his chest, shook the folds of his heavy, black cloak and yawned again. Then stooping low in the cave-mouth, with a powerful spring he alighted upon a log which crossed from one cut-bank to another of the stream. Umisk was whistling a quarter of a mile away down the left bank, but Black Fox started off up the right. As he trotted along he sang:–

”The trail that leads from nowhere to nowhere,
Is the track of the King of the Tribe of Beware.”

Suddenly he stopped, crept under a big log, and then emerged, tail first, backing up cautiously and putting his feet down carefully in the tracks he had made. ”They’ll find me asleep in there,” he chuckled; and hummed, softly:–

”Under the log the King is asleep;
Creep gently, Brother, creep;
Under the log is the old Fox nest;
Creep, Brother–mind his rest.”

Suddenly jumping sideways over a great Spruce lying prone on the ground, he started off again, singing merrily:–

”The track that breaks
Is a new track made;
For eyes are sharp
Where the nose is dead.”

Down the stream, below where Umisk was waiting, Black King crossed, saying

to himself: ”Now, François, when I go home the trail will be complete, with no little break at my front door–dear François, sweet François.”

With Umisk was Carcajou waiting for the King.

”What’s up?” asked Black Fox.

”The Man has found us out,” squeaked Umisk, despairingly.

”Too bad, too bad!” cried the King, with deep sympathy in his voice. ”Anything happened–any one caught?”

”Nothing serious at present. One of the Babes lost a toe–mighty close shave.”

”How did the Breed work it? The old game of breaking in your house–the Burglar?”

”No; that’s too stupid for François. Muskegs! but he is clever. The thing must have been done last night. He cut a hole in the ice of my pond near the dam, then shoved a nice, beautiful piece of Poplar, with a steel Trap attached, down into the water–one end in the mud, you know, and the other up in the ice. Of course it froze solid there. First-Kit, that’s my eldest Son, saw it in the morning, and, thinking one of our bread-sticks had got away, went down to bring it back. Mind you, I didn’t know anything about this; he is an ambitious little Chap and wanted to do it all himself. Of course the Poplar was fast–he couldn’t budge it; so climbed up to cut it off at the ice, with the result that he sprang the Trap and incidentally lost a toe.”

”It’s great schooling for the Children, though, isn’t it?” remarked Black King, trying to put a good face on affairs.

”It’s mighty hard on their toes,” whined Beaver. ”Hope it wasn’t his nippers–forgot to look into that.”

”Nothing like bringing them up to take care of themselves,” declared Carcajou. ”All the same, my Wood-chopper Friend, you just cut off that stick and float it, with the Trap, to one of your air-holes; I’ll cache it for François.”

”I was thinking of keeping it,” added Umisk, ”to teach the Youngsters what a Trap is like.”

”Well, just as you wish; only I’ll go and make a little trail from the spot off into the woods, so our busy Friend will think I’ve taken it. Hello, Nekik!” he continued, as Otter came sliding through the snow on his belly; ”has François been visiting you too?”

”I don’t know; there is something the matter with my Slide. It isn’t as I left it yesterday.”

”Birds of a Feather! Birds of a Feather!” screamed Whisky-Jack, fluttering to a limb over their heads. ”What’s the caucus about this morning–discussing chances of a breakfast this year of starvation and scarcity of Wapoos? Mild Winter! but I had a big feed. The Boy no more knows the value of food than he knows

the depravity of Carcajou's mind."

"Great hand for throwing away hot pork, isn't he, Jack?" asked Wolverine, innocently.

The Jay blinked his round bead-eyes, snapped his beak, and retorted: "They put in their evenings laughing over the roasting you got when you dropped into the fire."

"Where's François, Babbler?" asked the King.

"Gone out to bring in Deer Meat."

"Did he make a Kill?"

"U-h-huh! my crop is full."

"You horrid Beast!" cried Carcajou, disgustedly. "Where is it cached?"

"Not Mooswa?" broke in Black King, with a frightened voice.

"No–Caribou. Such a big shovel to his horn too–must have been of the Knowledge Age. Ugh! should have known better than to let a Man get near him. Of course François stuck the head on a tree to make peace with Manitou, and I'm fixed for a month."

"Cannibal!" again exclaimed Carcajou. "Where did you say your friend, Murderer, had cached the quarters?"

"'Cannibal,' eh? Go and find out, Glutton. Be careful, though–I saw some one handling the White Medicine last night."

"The White Medicine!" ejaculated Black Fox, turning with dismay to the speaker.

"Uh, huh! but I never steal the Bait, like Carcajou, so I don't care. I eat what the Men eat."

"What they leave, you mean, Scavenger–what they throw to the Dogs!" retorted the Lieutenant.

"You'll get enough of Dogs, First-Cousin-to-Ground Hog–François says he is going to have a train of them. They will squeeze your fat back if you come prowling about the Shack to steal food."

"Dogs," growled Blue Wolf, coming into the circle,–"who's got Dogs?"

"You'll have them–on your back, presently," snapped the Jay. "Saw you sniffing around there last night. If your jaws were as long as your scent you would have had that leg off the roof, eh, Rof? Burnt Feathers! but I smell something," he continued; "has any one found a Castoreum Bait, and got it in his pocket? I don't mean you, Beaver, you don't smell very bad. Oh! here you are, Sikak; it's you–I might have known what sweet Forest Flower had cut loose from its stalk. Have you been rolling in the dead Rose leaves this morning, my lover of Perfume?"

The white-striped Skunk pattered with quick, mincing little steps into the group, his back humped up and his terrible tail carried high, ready to resent any insult.

”Smothered anybody this morning, Sikak?” asked the Bird.

A laugh went round the circle at this sally of Jack’s; for Skunk’s method of fighting did not meet with universal approval. Blue Wolf thought Sikak was a good piece of meat clean thrown away. When hungry he could manage Badger, or even Porcupine; but Skunk! ”Ur-r-r, agh!” it turned his stomach to think of the dose he had received once when he tried it.

”Good-morning, Your Majesty!” said Lynx, as he arrived shortly after Skunk.

”How is everybody up your way?” queried Jack. ”How are all the young Wapooses?”

Lynx grinned deprecatingly.

”Pisew is not likely to forget the Law of the Seventh Year,” remarked Carcajou, with a sinister expression, ”so he is not so deeply interested in young Wapoos as he used to be.”

”What is the meeting for?” asked Lynx.

”François has been visiting the pond of our little Comrade, Umisk,” replied Black King.

”And has been at my Slide, too,” declared Otter.

”Well, Comrades, we had better go with Nekik and examine into this thing,” commanded the King.

”Oh, of course!” cried Jack; ”every community must have Fishery Laws, and have its Fisheries protected.”

The Otter slide was exactly like a boy’s coasting chute on a hill. A smooth, iced trough ran down the snow-covered bank, a matter of fifteen feet, to the stream’s edge, ending in an ice hole that Otter managed to keep open all Winter. Generally speaking, it was Nekik’s entrance to his river-home, and in the event of danger demanding a quick disappearance, he could shoot down it into the water like a bullet. It was also a play-ground for Otter’s family; their favourite pastime being to glide helter-skelter down the chute and splash into the stream.

”What’s wrong with it?” asked Black Fox. ”There’s a nasty odour of Man about, I admit, but your Slide seems all clear and smooth.”

”Something’s been changed. I had a little drop put in the centre for the Youngsters, and they liked it–thought it was like falling off a bank, you know; now that part is filled up nearly level, you see. I don’t know what is in it–was afraid to look; but expect François has set a Trap there.”

”I’ll find out,” said Carcajou. ”These Traps all work from the top–I’ve discovered that much. If you keep walking about, you’re pretty sure to get into one of them; but if you sit down and think, and scrape sideways a bit, you’ll get hold of something that won’t go off.” Talking thus, he dug with his strong claws at the edge of the Slide. ”I thought so!” he exclaimed suddenly. ”Here’s a ring around

a stake–I know what that means!"

Feeling cautiously for the chain, he presently pulled out a No. 3 steel Trap. With notched jaws wide open, and tip-plate holding its flat surface up inviting the loosening pressure, it was a vicious-looking affair.

"Let me spring it," said Wolf; "I'm used to them." Grabbing the chain end in his teeth, he threw the Trap over his head as a dog does a bone in play, and when it came down the sides clanged together with hurried fondness.

"Hurrah! hurrah!" whistled Otter. "Something told me not to go down that Slide. I felt it in my bones."

"You'd have felt it on your bones," piped Jay, ironically, "if you had slid your fat belly over that Trap."

"Oh, I'm just dying for a slide and a bath," continued Nekik–"here goes!"

"Wait a bit!" commanded Carcajou, grabbing him by the shoulder, "don't be too eager. That isn't François's Lucky Trap. If he has discovered your front stream, you can just depend upon it his Lucky Trap is laid away somewhere for you–it's got two red bands painted on the springs."

As these words of wisdom fell from Carcajou's lips his Comrades gathered their feet more closely under them, and searched the surrounding territory apprehensively with their eyes.

"Where will it be?" cried Nekik, distressedly.

"In the water!" answered Carcajou, with brief decision.

"Dreadful!" whimpered Otter.

"François is a heartless wretch!" declared Beaver. "He tried to play that trick on me once."

"Where was that, Paddle-tail?" queried Jack, who was always eager for a bit of gossip.

"It was when I lived up on Pembina River. You know the way with us Beavers–we always take a month or two of holiday every Summer, and visit our Friends. It was in June–I remember; I opened the Lodge to let it air, and started down stream with my whole family. Of course we passed many Beaver-roads running to the river, and when we thought they belonged to friends we'd pull out and go up on the bank. Carcajou, you know the little round bowl of mud we Beaver leave on our river-roads for visitors' cards?"

"Yes," replied Wolverine; "they're a rather good idea. You always know just who has passed, don't you?"

"Yes, we can tell, generally. Well, as I was saying, we went up the bank in one of these Roads, and by the odour of the little clay mound I knew that Red Jowl, a cousin of mine, was just inside the Wood–or had been. So the family went among the Poplars to have a bite of bread; and just as we were felling a tree whom should I see but François drifting down the river in his canoe; we kept

pretty close, you had better believe."

"Didn't call out to him, Umisk, eh?" asked Jay–"didn't clap each other on the back with your tails and say, 'Here comes a Chum.'"

Umisk proceeded, paying no attention to the flippant Bird. "When the Breed came opposite our Road he stopped his canoe, let it drift gently up to the bank, pulled out a Trap and set it in muddy water just at the foot of the path. He was clever enough not to touch the land even with his paddle, so there was no scent–nothing to warn a poor Beaver of the danger. Then he floated on down. If I had not seen the whole thing this depraved taker of our lives would have caught me sure; for you know how we go into the water, Nekik, just as you do–head and hands first."

"That's an old trick of François's," exclaimed Carcajou; "and you'll find that is just what he has done here. If Mister Nekik will feel cautiously at the foot of his Slide he will find something hard and smooth, not at all like a stick or a stone."

"Fat Fish! but I'm afraid of my fingers," whistled Otter.

"Sure, if you work from the top," retorted Carcajou. "Sideways is the game with the Trap always–or upward."

"You forgot that, Mister Carcajou, when you tackled the Chimney," twittered Jay.

"I didn't burn my tongue, anyway."

"Is Nekik afraid to safeguard his own Slide," sneered Whisky-Jack.

"Shut up, Quarrel Maker!" interposed the King, "you know Otter is one of the pluckiest fighters inside the Boundaries. It's only brainless Animals who tackle things they know nothing about."

"Dive their beaks into hot Pork, your Most Wise Majesty," echoed Lynx, with a fawning smile.

"Here's Sakwasew, he'll find the Trap, he's a water dweller," exclaimed Carcajou, as Mink, attracted by their chatter, came wandering down the stream. "Here, little Black-tail," he continued, "just dip down the hole there and look for evidence of François's deviltry."

"It's against the Law of the Boundaries," pleaded Mink, "for me to use Otter's ice hole. By the Kink in my Tail, I'm not like some of my Comrades, always breaking the laws."

"Aren't you, Mink? Who cut the throats of Gray Hen, the Grouse's, Children, last July, when they were still in their pin-feathers? But I suppose that isn't breaking the Law of the Boundaries," cried Lynx, taking Mink's observation to himself.

"Oh, no," chipped in Whisky-Jack; "certain of you Animals think keeping the Law is not getting caught. My own opinion is, you're as bad as Men. When François puts out the White Death-powder, he thinks he is keeping Man's law if

the Red Coats do not catch him; and Sakwasew cuts the throat of Chick-Grouse, and you, Pisew, eat Kit Beaver, and it's all within the Law if there be no witnesses. I don't know what we are coming to."

"Stop wrangling, you Subjects!" commanded Black King; and the silvered fur on his back stood straight up in anger. "I'll order Rof to thrash you soundly, if you don't stop this."

Pisew slunk tremblingly behind a tree, and Carcajou, humping his back, exclaimed: "Brother Nekik, I'll fish out that Trap for you; I'm sure it's there–my good nose lines the track of a Man straight to the hole." In less than two minutes he triumphantly swung a steel-jawed thing up on the bank. "There, what did I tell you!" he boasted proudly. "But the ring is on a stout root or stick–cut it off, Umisk, with your strong chisel-teeth, and Fisher will carry it up that big hollow Poplar and cache it in a hole."

"I will, if you spring the jaws first," agreed Fisher.

Otter was overjoyed. "This is fine!" he cried; "I'll be back in a minute!" and he darted down the Slide as an Indian throws the snake-stick over the snow.

"What fine sport!" remarked Carcajou, when Nekik came up again, shaking the water from his strong, bristled mustache.

"Shall we have some games?" suggested the King. "I'll give a fat Pheasant to the one who slides down Nekik's chute best–that is, of course, barring Nekik himself."

"But the water, Your Majesty!" interposed Pisew.

"I don't want to wet my feet," pleaded Wapistan, the Marten; "if you'll make the race up a tree I will willingly join."

"So will I!" concurred Fisher.

"Or three miles straight over the hill," suggested Blue Wolf.

"Make it a wrestling match!" said Carcajou.

"No, no," declared Black King. "No one need go in the hole, of course. When you come to the bottom, spring over to the ice–that will be part of the game."

After much wrangling and discussion they all agreed to try it. Mink went first, being more familiar with slides, for he had a little one of his own. He did it rather nicely, but forgetting to jump at the bottom, dove into the water.

"That rules you out!" decided the King. "You left the course, you see. Go on, Rof!"

Blue Wolf fixed himself gingerly at the upper end of the Slide, and, at the last minute, decided to take it sitting, riding down on his great haunches. This worked first-rate, until the ice was reached. Rof was going with so much speed by this time, that he couldn't gather for a spring; his hind quarters slipped through the hole, which, being just about his size, caused him to wedge tight. He gave a roar of surprise that made the woods ring, for the stream was icy cold. "Keep

your nose above water or you'll drown, old Bow-wow," piped Jay.

[image]

ROF WAS GOING WITH SO MUCH SPEED, ... THAT HE COULDN'T GATHER FOR A SPRING.

It took the combined strength of Beaver and Carcajou to pull the grumbling animal out. "By the White Spot on my Tail," laughed Black King, "but I thought for a time you were going to win. Your turn, Pisew." Lynx made a grimace of dislike, for his cat nature revolted at the thought of water, but he crept on to the slide with nervous steps.

"You won't get in the hole," jeered Jack; "your feet are too big."

Pisew tried it standing up, with arched back, just for all the world like a cat on a garden fence. As he neared the bottom at lightning speed, confusion seized him; he tried to spring, but only succeeded in throwing a half somersault, and plunged head first into the water. The Jay fairly screamed with delight, and hopped about on his perch overhead in a perfect ecstasy of fiendish enjoyment. "Didn't scorch his tongue a bit!" he cried. "Give him the tail feathers of the Pheasant to dry his face with, oh, Your Majesty! Ha, ha, ha! Pe-he-e-e!" Pisew scrambled out filled with morose anger.

"That's another failure," adjudged the King. "Who is next?"

"Carcajou's turn!" instigated Whisky-Jack. "He knows all about sliding up and down chimneys–he'll win, sure!"

"I will try it," grunted the fat, little Chap; "but if you make fun of me, Jack, I'll wring your neck first chance I get."

Wolverine shuffled clumsily to the starting post, studied the Slide critically for a minute with his little snake-like eyes, then deliberately turned over on his back, and prepared for the descent.

"Tuck in your ears!" shouted Whisky Jack. Now this was an insult. Carcajou's ears were so very short that they were generally supposed to have been cut off for stealing. However, Wolverine started, tail first, holding his head up between his fore-paws to judge distances. When he struck the bottom, his powerful hind-feet jammed into the snow, and the speed of his going threw him safely over on the ice, landing him right side up on all-fours.

"Capital! Capital!" yapped Black King, patting his furred hands together in approval. "That will be pretty hard to beat. Skunk, you're a clever little Fellow, see if you can make a tie of it with Carcajou." Sikak moved up to the Slide with a peculiar rocking-horse-like gallop. Taking his cue from Carcajou he decided

to go down the same way. Now, in the excitement of the thing the animals had gathered close to the Slide, lining it on both sides.

"Cranky little White-streak!" exclaimed Whisky-Jack; "why don't you make a speech before you start."

Skunk had never travelled in this shape before, and was nervous. During his delay over getting a straight start, Carcajou and Mink, half-way down, got into an altercation about a good seat that each claimed.

"Keep it, then, Glutton!" whined Sakwasew, starting across the chute. As he did so, Skunk got away rather prematurely, coming down with the speed of a snow-slide off a roof. He struck Mink full amidship, and thinking it was a diabolical trick on the part of the others, developed an angry odour that would have put a Lyddite shell to shame.

A wild scramble took place.

"Fat Hens!" shrieked Black King, as he fled through the Forest, his long brush trailing in the snow.

"I'm choking!" screamed Carcajou. "By the power of all Forest Smells, was there ever such a disgraceful Chap on the face of the Earth;" and he scurried away with his short legs, just for all the world like a Bear Cub.

Fisher climbed a tree in hot haste, as did Marten. Mink dove in the Otter's hole and disappeared; but with him he carried the evil thing, for he was full of the blue halo that vibrated from his skunk-smirched coat. "I shall never be able to go home any more," he moaned; "my relatives will kill me."

Even Jay clasped one claw over his nose and flew wildly through the forest, almost knocking out his brains against branches. In ten seconds there was nobody left on the ground but Otter and poor little white-striped Skunk. The collision had sent him rolling over and over down to the ice bottom of the stream. He got up, shook himself, used some very bad animal language, and slunk away to his family, to tell them of the trick Carcajou and Mink had played him.

"That Glutton was afraid I'd win the Pheasant," he confided to Mrs. Sikak; "but I broke up the party, anyway."

Otter was wandering about disconsolately through the woods, declaiming to the trees that his Slide was ruined for all time to come, and he really wished the Trap had ended his days.

THE TRAPPING OF WOLVERINE

When François missed the Beaver trap that had been placed in the dam, and that Umisk had taken for his sons to study, also the two set on Otter's slide, it made him furious. He knew Wolverine must have cached them. Once before he had been forced to give up a good Marten Road because of the relentless ingenuity of this almost human-brained animal; but it would be different this time, the Half-breed declared–he would make a fight of it.

"I keel me dat Carcajou!" he exclaimed emphatically over and over again to The Boy. "Dat Debil ob de Wood he eat my bait, an' cac'e de Trap, an' come an' sit dere by de door an' listen what we talk. I see de track dis mornin'."

The very night François made this boast, Wolverine came and entirely appropriated the remaining hind-quarter of his Caribou from the roof. When the Half-breed discovered this fresh mark of his enemy's energetic attention he became inarticulate with ire.

"Why don't you try the strychnine on him?" asked Roderick.

"Dat no use," declared the enraged Trapper; "when I put poison in de bait, Carcajou come, smell him, den he do some dirty trick on it for make me swear. But I catc' him soor–I put de gun wid pull-string."

He spent the greater part of the next day arranging a muzzle-loading shot gun, with a trade ball in it, for the destruction of the animal who had stolen his venison. François had seen Wolverine's own private little path for coming up the bank of the Pelican, and on this he staked down the gun and put some pine logs on either side, so that Carcajou must take the bait from in front. The gun was left cocked, with a string attached to the trigger; on the string, just at the muzzle, was tied a piece of Caribou meat.

Wolverine chuckled when he saw the arrangement. "Poor old François!" he muttered ironically: "this is really too bad; it's actual robbery to take that Bait–it's so easy."

Now this little wood-dweller had a most decided streak of vanity in his make-up. Like many really smart men, he liked to show off his cunning–that was his weakness. "This is a good chance to give some of the others an object lesson," he said to himself, sitting down to wait for an audience. Presently Blue Wolf and Lynx came in sight, jogging along together. "Eur-r-r-r!" said Wolf, hoarsely; "had any Eating this day, Gulo?"

"No appetite," declared Carcajou, getting up so the half-starved Lynx might see his well-rounded stomach.

"Most wise Lieutenant," smirked Pisew, "what wisdom hast thou originated this day?"

"That's a queer thing, isn't it?" remarked Carcajou, nodding his broad forehead towards the baited gun.

Blue Wolf looked, took a wide detour, and approached it from the side. The

others followed in his footsteps.

"Years have given you sagacity, Mister Rof," commended Wolverine. "From the side always, eh? Danger sits on top, and Death waits in front."

"My nose finds a Bait!" answered Wolf.

"It's Meat!" added Pisew, working his mustached upper lip like a cat.

"I smell powder!" declared Carcajou, quietly.

"The evil breath of the Ironstick?" queried Blue Wolf. "Perhaps the White Death-powder makes that peculiar odour," he hazarded.

"No," asserted Carcajou; "François knows better than that: to smell that Bait costs nothing; to bite it makes a heavier price than either of us cares to pay. François knows that we smell first, and bite last; and if our noses detected aught amiss would we pull the string with our teeth?"

"Wise Lieutenant!" murmured Lynx.

"Cunning old Thief!" mused Wolf to himself.

"Do either of you food-hunters want it?" asked Carcajou.

"I'm not very hungry this morning," answered Blue Wolf.

"I discovered seven Deer Mice under a log not two hours ago," lied Pisew; "sweet, long-eared little Chaps they were, and quite fat from eating the seeds of the yellow-lipped Sunflower–most delicious flavour it gives to their flesh. My stomach is at peace for the first time in many days."

"Keep your eye open for the Breed-Man, then," commanded Wolverine; "I think I'd relish that Caribou steak–your Deer-Mice have given me an appetite." He tore the pine logs away from one side of the gun, examined the string critically, cut it with his sharp teeth just behind the bait, and devoured the fresh meat with great gusto, smacking his lips with a tantalizing suggestiveness of good fare.

"In case of accidents I think I'd better break up this Ironstick," he said. Seizing the hammer in his strong jaws, and placing his paws on the barrel and stock, he tore it off and completely demolished the old muzzle-loader.

"Well," yawned Wolf, stretching himself, "you're a match for the Man, I believe. I'm off, for I've got a long run ahead of me–the Pack gathers to-night at Deep Creek."

"What's the run–Stag?" asked Pisew, insinuatingly.

"Whatever it may be it will be all eaten," answered Rof; "so you needn't trail. Good-bye, Lieutenant," he barked, loping with powerful strides through the woods out of sight.

"I'll go with you, most wise Lieutenant," declared Pisew.

"Well, trot along in front," grunted Carcajou; "I want to fix the trail a bit." After they had walked for half an hour Wolverine stopped, and, cocking his eye up a slim pole which seemed to grow from the centre of a high Spruce stump, exclaimed, "Great-Eating! what in the name of Wiesahkechack is that?"

”Meat!” answered Pisew, looking at something which dangled from the top of the pole.

”It’s François again,” said Carcajou, sniffing at the stump.

”What a splendid cache,” cried Lynx, admiringly; ”nobody but Squirrel could climb that pole.”

”But they might knock it down,” declared Carcajou. ”I have a notion to try.”

”Better leave it alone,” advised Pisew. ”If it’s François, there’s something wrong.”

”Carcajou doesn’t take advice from a cotton-headed Cat,” sneered the other. ”Easy Killing! but I’m going up to see what it’s like. I know that stump–it’s hollow; there is no chance for a Trap there.” It was about three feet high. Wolverine made a running jump, grabbing the top edge to pull himself up; as he did so something snapped. A howl of enraged surprise came from the little animal as he dangled with hind toes just touching the ground, and his fore-paws in a steel Trap which he had pulled over the side. The cunning Breed had blocked up his Trap on the inside of the hollow shell, where it was invisible from the ground.

”For the Sake of Security! don’t make such a noise,” pleaded Pisew.

”Fool-talker!” retorted Carcajou; ”come and help me out of this fix.”

”I can’t open the Trap,” objected Lynx; ”why, it would take the strength of Muskwa to flatten its springs.”

”Run to the King and ask for help, as is the law of the Boundaries,” ordered Wolverine.

”Gently, Mister Lieutenant, gently; don’t get so excited–keep cool.”

”Wait till I get out of this,” screamed Carcajou; ”I’ll warm your jacket.”

”There, there,” returned Lynx, ”don’t threaten me–don’t abuse me, and I’ll help you–”

”That’s a good Pisew–hurry, please–François may come–”

”On one condition,” added Lynx, sitting down on his haunches with deliberate self-possession.

”Hang the conditions!” blustered Carcajou–”talk of conditions with a Fellow’s fingers in a steel Trap!”

”All the same, I’ll only do it on one condition–when they talked the other day of making me King–”

”’*They* talked,’” interrupted Carcajou; ”nobody talked of making you King.”

”*You* didn’t, I know, Lieutenant; but that’s just what I want you to promise now, before I help you.”

”I’ll see you Snared first!” grunted Wolverine, snapping at the Trap chain which was fastened to the pole, until he screamed with pain.

”All right–I’m off! François will soon find you,” declared Pisew.

”Come back!” cried the entrapped Animal. ”What do you wish?”

”Well, if anything happens Black King, we’ll need another ruler–anyway, next year there’ll be an election, and I want you to stick up for me as you did for Black Fox. You’re so wise and eloquent, dear Carcajou, that the others will do just as you advise. I could make it worth while, too, if there were any charges against you; suppose some one accused you unjustly of having eaten a Cub or a Kit under the Killing Age, why, I could see that nothing happened, you know.”

”Sneak! Thief! Murderer!” ejaculated Carcajou disdainfully. ”If I could but get out of this fix, I’d eat you.”

”What’s the row, you Fellows?” piped a bird-voice, as Whisky-Jack swooped down to a small Poplar, and craned his neck in amazement at the sight he beheld. ”By my Lonely Life!” he chuckled, ”if here isn’t the King of all Knaves sitting with his hands in the stocks. Great Rations! but you’re a wise one; whose toes hurt now, Mister Mocker? Why doesn’t that cat-faced Lynx help you out?”

”I offered to,” declared Pisew, ”but his temper is so vile I dare not touch him. He threatened to kill me–I’m afraid to go near him.”

”Why don’t you run to Black King for help, you stupid–you can’t open that Trap.”

”Wise Bird,” almost sobbed Carcajou, in his gratitude, ”this scheming rascal took advantage of my misfortune, and tried to make me promise to do something for him, or he would let François catch me.”

”Pisew is not to be trusted–he is too much like a Man,” asserted Jack. Turning to the Lynx, he exclaimed, angrily: ”You go on the back-trail there, and if François comes, lead him off slowly; just keep in his sight–he’ll follow you. I will get the Lieutenant out of this. Mind, if you play any tricks, or break the Oath of the Boundaries, the King will command Blue Wolf to break your back–he’ll do it too. I’m off for help,” he said to the prisoner; ”just keep your courage up, old Carey;” and working his fan-like wings with exceeding diligence, he dove through the woods at a great rate toward the King’s Burrow.

”I was only joking, dear friend Carcajou,” said Lynx, fawningly, for he dreaded the anger of the other animals. ”Don’t say a word about it to the King; he might think I was in earnest.”

”Traitor!” snarled Wolverine; ”go back and watch for François.”

”Don’t say any more about it,” pleaded Pisew, ”and I’ll watch, oh, so carefully, most loyal, true Lieutenant.”

Whisky-Jack’s shrill call from a tree startled the family of the Red Widow.

”Quick, Royal Son,” she cried, ”there’s a danger signal. Listen: ’Hee-e-e-p, hee-e-ep, he-e-e-ep!’ That means some one caught. Where are my Sons? All here but Stripes, Goodness!” She wrung her paws miserably, and in her eagerness rushed to the door. ”What is it, Bringer of Evil News? Who’s caught–not my Baby Cub?” she asked of Whisky-Jack.

”No, Good Dame. Would you believe it, the cleverest one in all the Boundaries, excepting your Son, is now keeping the jaws of a Trap apart with his own soft paws–it’s Carcajou.”

”What’s to do?” cried Black Fox, joining his Mother.

”Carcajou is caught!” she answered, heaving a sigh of relief that it wasn’t Cross-stripes.

Jay Bird explained the situation.

”Nobody but Muskwa can spring a Number Four Trap,” asserted the King; ”and he is holed up these two days–isn’t he, Mother?”

”Yes,” she assented. ”And asleep by now. You will find him at the big Burrow that is in the fourth cut-bank from here up stream.”

”The old Chap must get up, then,” cried Black Fox, with emphasis, ”for he is not in the deep frost-sleep yet. Here, Jack, run and bring Beaver to cut off the pole Carcajou’s Trap is ringed to, and I’ll go for Muskwa; if you see Rof, tell him to meet me at Bear’s Burrow.”

The King had a tremendous time with Muskwa. Bruin was sleepy and cranky. ”Quick! wake up, Brother!” Black Fox shouted in his ear. The Bear never moved–simply snored.

The energetic visitor turned tail on, and proceeded to rake Bruin’s ribs with his strong hind feet as a dog makes the gravel fly. Muskwa grunted and simply flicked his short, woolly ears. The King jumped on him, set up the long howl of the Kill in his very face, put his sharp teeth through one of the nerveless ears, and generally held a small riot over the sleeper. He never would have managed to wake Bear had not Blue Wolf arrived to help him.

Muskwa was for all the world like a maudlin, drunken old sailor. ”All right, you Fellows,” he said groggily, his eyes still closed, ”I don’t want any more Berries–eat ’em yourself.”

”Not Berries!” howled Wolf; ”Carcajou is in a Trap.”

”Go ’way–don’t believe it. Carcajou’s an old Sweep!”

Blue Wolf’s powerful voice rang the Chase Note in Muskwa’s ear. It woke the big fellow sufficiently to enable him to take a side-hook sweep at the offender with his disengaged paw. The blow was a sleepy one, else it had cracked his tormentor’s skull.

”He’s coming all right,” remarked the King, critically.

”By the Flavour of Meat, he is!” ejaculated Rof.

In the end they got Muskwa on his feet, with a little understanding in his stupor-clogged brain, and half-pushing, half-leading, conducted him to where Carcajou was sitting in the stocks. In his flight Whisky-Jack had met Mooswa, and he was there also. Beaver was chiselling away at the pole; for once loosened, even if they could not spring the Trap sufficiently to get Carcajou’s paws

out, between them they might manage to get him away and cached somewhere; anything was better than letting him fall into the Trapper's hands.

"Of all the wood I ever cut this is the worst," panted Umisk, resting for a minute. "It cramps my neck cutting down so close sideways. It is dry Tamarack, the slivers are all sticking in my tongue."

As Black Fox and Rof withdrew their paws from under Muskwa's arms, he keeled over lazily and went sound asleep in two seconds. "Give him a good lift with your hind-foot, Mooswa," commanded the King, sharply. "Of all the heavy-brained Animals I ever saw!"

"If we but had some of Man's fire," opined Jack, "we could wake him up quick enough by singeing a couple of my feathers under his nose."

Mooswa planted both hind-feet, bang! in Bear's ribs; Rof gave a deep bay in his face; Black King once more put his saw-like teeth through an ear; and by these gentle, persuasive methods Muskwa was wakened sufficiently to get on his feet. He swayed drunkenly. "Stop fighting, Cubs!" he growled, under the impression that he was being bothered by some of his own children.

"Get up and squeeze the springs of the Trap–Carcajou is caught! Here they are–put a paw on each–there! squeeze!" yelled Black Fox.

Just then Beaver finished cutting the pole, and it fell with a crash–the noise helped waken Muskwa.

"Slip the ring off the stub, Umisk, that's a good Chap," cried Wolverine. This done, he and the Trap clattered to the ground.

"Come on!" screamed Black Fox to Muskwa, as he and Rof shouldered him to the Trap. "Squeeze now!" the Fox shouted again, placing Bear's powerful paws on the springs.

"I'll squeeze," answered Bruin, petulantly; "but why don't you speak louder–say what you mean. You Fellows have all got colds–I can't hear you."

"Dead Eagles! but François will," remarked Jay.

"There, now, a little harder–use your strength, Muskwa!"

The Bear pressed his great weight on the springs; they slipped down, and the jaws slowly opened like the sides of a travelling-bag. With a cry of delight Carcajou pulled his bruised fingers out, and in gratitude rubbed his short little Coon-like head against Bruin's great cheek. "Good old Muskwa!" he cried joyfully; "I'll never forget this."

"Your fingers will be a long time sore, then," sneered Jay.

"Never–mind–little friend. It's all right; let me go–to sleep now, don't–don't bother;" and he flopped over like a bag of potatoes, sighed wearily once or twice, and started off with a monotonous, bubbling snore. "He's hopeless," moaned the King. "We'll never get him home."

"I saw François just like that once," chirped Whisky-Jack; "he had some

medicine in a bottle, and the more of it he took the sleepier he got."

"How in the name of Many Birds shall we ever get him back to his hole?" asked Black Fox, perplexedly.

"I'll carry him," declared the Moose. "Here, you Fellows, roll him up on my horns;" and dropping to his knees Mooswa put the great, chair-like spread of his antlers down to the snow.

"Come, Pisew, give us a hand," commanded the King. Beaver, and Lynx, and Rof, and Black Fox shouldered and pushed at the huge black ball, and Mooswa kept edging his horn-cradle in under the mass, until finally Muskwa lay snugly in the hollow.

"Now all give a mighty push, and help me up!" snuffed the Moose. "All right," he added, staggering to his feet, and pointing his nose skyward, allowing the burdened antlers to lie along his withers.

"Ride with Muskwa, Jack," commanded the King, "and show Mooswa the old Sleeper's house. Branch out, the rest of you, and make the Many-trail; for many trails make few catches." Carcajou was sitting on his haunches, licking his aching paws. "How are you going to get home, Little Comrade?" he asked.

"I'll give him a lift," interposed Blue Wolf. "Clamber up, old Curiosity." They were a funny-looking party–quite like an ambulance train; Muskwa asleep on Mooswa's horns, and Carcajou astraddle of Wolf's strong back.

[image]

THEY WERE A FUNNY-LOOKING PARTY.

"Walk in Rof's tracks, Pisew, till you strike a muskeg," ordered the King; "François won't fancy the fun of following a traveller like you through a big swamp."

"I should like to hide that Trap," lamented Carcajou.

"Oh, never mind," interrupted Black Fox. "Get away home, everybody."

"I'll hear some choice French to-night," declared Jack. "When François discovers that somebody has robbed his Trap, he'll jabber himself asleep."

All the way to his home Carcajou swore vengeance on the Man who had made his paws so sore. "You'll do it, Brother," said Rof, "and I don't blame you.

Of course we must remember our oath about The Boy."

THE COMING OF THE TRAIN DOGS

For three days nothing unusual happened. Hunger commenced to nip at every one, for, as we know, it was the Seventh Year of the Rabbit cycle, and they were scarce. All the others envied old Muskwa, slumbering peacefully, nourished by the fat of his Summer's pillage.

The narrow body of Lynx was getting narrower, the gaunt sides of Blue Wolf gaunter. Fisher and Marten were living on Deer Mice, Squirrels, and small game; and the Red Widow's family were depending almost entirely upon Spruce Partridge–the flesh of these birds had become particularly astringent, too. The gray-mottled, pin-tail Grouse had entirely disappeared–better eating they were, the Widow contended; but in the Seventh Year it was not a matter of selection at all, and each Animal was poaching on the other's preserve–all because of the scarcity of Wapoos. But in spite of the general starvation, every one left a small dole of his food for Carcajou, whose paws were too sore to prowl about. He felt the restricted diet more than any of them, being a perfect gourmand,–"Gulo the Glutton," that was his name; and he liked good living.

On the fourth day Whisky-Jack startled his comrades with the announcement that François had acquired a train of four dogs from Nichemous, who was passing down the ice-road of the river with a Free-Trader. Blue Wolf snuffed discontentedly at the news; they were his enemies, and many a scar he carried as souvenir of combats with these domesticated cousins. Family instinct, however, led him to skulk close to François's Shack one evening hoping to see the dogs. He went often after the first visit, though advised by Carcajou that it would end in his getting a destroying blast from the Firestick.

"They haven't got one," Rof assured him. "You destroyed the only Ironstick they had."

"That was an old Trade Musket," retorted Wolverine. "François is too clever to put his good Ironstick out in the wet. You'll find that he has another, if you don't keep away. What's the attraction, anyway?" he asked. "There can't be anything to eat there, with those yelping Huskies about."

It was Whisky-Jack who gave the secret away. "Blue Wolf's in love," he said, solemnly; "three of the Train are of the sister kind, and Rof's got his eye on

one. François calls her 'Marsh Maid,' but the Train-leader is a big Huskie Dog, and he'll chew Growler the Wolf into little bits–I sha'n't mind, Rof's too surly for me."

Blue Wolf became a great dandy; brushed his coat–scraped the snow away from a moss patch in the Jack-Pines, and rubbed his shaggy fur till it became quite presentable.

The big fight that Jack anticipated so eagerly materialized, but, contrary to Jay's forecast, Rof trounced the Huskie soundly. After that he came and went pretty much as he desired–growled his admiration of Marsh Maid, and took forcible possession of Huskie's White Fish.

All this nearly brought sorrow to the Red Widow's family, for Stripes, the Kit-Fox, having his curiosity roused by Jack's recital of Blue Wolf's doings, incautiously ventured close to the Shack one day to have a look at the Train. With an angry howl Huskie swooped down upon him, and but for Rod, who, hearing Stripes's plaintive squeal, rushed out and drove the Dog off, he would have been most effectually eaten up. The young Fox fled for his life, and his tale of this adventure filled the Red Widow's heart with gratitude toward The Boy.

Within the Boundaries the food fever was strong on the Animals, and François's baits became an almost irresistible temptation. Trap after Trap Black King and his family robbed, leaving the Meat with the White Powder in, and taking it when it was clear of this, until François was in despair.

"By Goss!" he confided to The Boy, "I t'ink me we goin' keel no fur here. Dat Carcajou he de Debil, but mos' all de odder Animal is Debil too. S'pose I put out de Trap, dey take de bait, cac'e de Trap, and s'pose me dey laugh by deyselves. I see dat Black Fox two, t'ree time, an' I know me his track now; ev'ry day I see dat tracks. But we must catc' him. What fur we keel now? Not enough to pay fer de grub stake."

THE TRAPPING OF BLACK FOX

So far all the plans of the Half-breed for capturing Black Fox had failed; but one day conditions were favourable for his master-stroke–a rare trick known only to himself. He smiled grimly when in the early morning he discovered that the snow bore a tender young crust just sufficient to bear a fair-sized animal. His preparations were elaborate.

”To-day we catc’ dat black fell’,” he said, gleefully, to Rod. ”You wait here till I s’oot Mister Mus’rat firs’ for bait, den I s’ow you some treek.”

Soon François returned with a freshly killed Muskrat, which he promptly skinned, taking great care not to touch the meat with his hands. Putting the hindquarters in a pouch formed from the blood-stained skin, he next made a long-handled scraper. ”Now I fix dis tea-dance where de fox alway go for sit in one place ever’ day–I know me dat place,” he chuckled as, gathering up the outfit, he started for the Forest.

Arrived there François pulled the snow from under the gentle crust with his scraper for a space of six or eight feet, leaving a miniature cave under the frozen shell. Into this he shoved two strong steel Traps, and using a long stick emptied the Muskrat pouch of its meat just above.

”Now, Mister S’arp-nose,” muttered the Breed, ”I t’ink me you no smell not’ing but Meat. You don’t like smell François, eh? For dat I give me de Mus’rat smell for you’ nose.”

Backing away from his work the Half-breed carefully smoothed down the snow into his tracks for a long distance, then filling his pipe, lighted it, and trudged back to the Shack to await the success of this ruse. When Black King came up the wind, winding up the meat-scent like a ball of yarn, he struck a new combination. There were no evidences of Man’s handicraft; no Trap insight–no baited gun; no Marten stockade; no bent sapling with a hungry noose dangling to it; but there were undoubtedly two nice, juicy, appetizing pieces of meat lying on top of the undisturbed snow-crust.

Black Fox sat down and surveyed the surrounding territory critically; cocked his sharp eyes and sharper nose toward all points of the compass. The Forest was like a graveyard–as silent; no hidden enemy lurked near with ready Firestick–his nose assured him on that point.

Then he walked gingerly in a big circle all about the glamourous centre-piece of sweet-smelling meat, his nose prospecting every inch of the ground. Something had evidently disturbed the snow where François had smoothed it down. Three circles he completed like this; each one smaller and closer to the Bait. Three lengths of himself from the covered-danger he sat down again, and tried to think it out.

”It can’t be a Trap,” he mused; ”nothing has walked where the eating is, that much is certain. François can smooth the white ground-cover down, but can’t put a crust on it. Starvation Year! but that Meat smells good–I haven’t eaten for two days. I wish it were a Trap–then I should know what I was about. It looks mighty suspicious–must be the White Powder; think I had better leave it alone. If there were only a Trap in sight I would tackle it quick enough; it’s easy to spring one of those things and get the Bait.”

He trotted away twenty yards, meaning to go home and not risk it. Suddenly he stopped, sat down once more and thought it all over again, his determination weakened by appetite. His lean stomach clamoured for the Meat–it was full of nothing but the great pain of hunger.

"Forest Devils!" muttered the hesitating Fox; "I believe I'm losing my nerve–am afraid because there isn't anything in sight but the Meat. I'd never hear the last of it if Carcajou, or Pisew, or any of them came along, saw my trail, and then, having more pluck than I've got, went and ate that free eating. I wonder what it is? Smells like a cut of Muskrat, or a piece of Caribou; it's not Fish."

He walked back cautiously, irresolutely, and took a look from the opposite side. "I have a notion to try it; I can tell if there's White Medicine about when I get it at the end of my nose," he said, peering all about carefully; there was nobody in sight–nothing! "Women Foxes!" but he was nervous. His big "brush" was simply trembling with the fear of some unknown danger. He laughed hysterically at the idea. It was the unusualness of Meat lying on the snow and no evidence of why it should be there: there was no appearance of a Kill near the spot. How in the world had it come there? There was no track leading up to nor away from it; perhaps Hawk, or Whisky-Jack, or some other bird had dropped it. It was the most wonderful problem he had ever run up against.

But thinking it over brought no solution; also his stomach clamoured louder and louder for the appetizing morsel. Rising up, Black King crept cautiously towards the fascinating object. His foot went through the snow crust. "This wouldn't bear up a Baby Lynx," he thought. "Neither François nor any other Man can have been near that Meat."

He took another step–and another, eyes and nose inspecting every inch of the snow. He could almost reach it; another step, and as his paw sank through the crust it touched something smooth and slippery. There was a clang of iron, and the bone of his left fore-leg was clamped tight in the cruel jaws of a Fox Trap.

Poor old Black King! Despair and pain stretched him, sobbing queer little whimpering cries of anguish in the snow. Only for an instant; then he realized that unless help came from his Comrades his peerless coat would soon be stretched skin-side out on a wedge-shaped board in François's shack. Shrill and plaintive his trembling whistle, "Wh-e-e-he-e-e-, Wh-e-e-he-e-e!" went vibrating through the still Forest in a supplicating call to his companions for succour.

Then an hour of despairing anguish, without one single glint of hope. Every crack of tree-bark, as the frost stretched it, was the snapping of a twig under François's feet; every rustle of bare branches overhead was the shuffling rasp of his snow-shoes on the yielding crust.

Excruciating pains shot up the Fox's leg and suggested grim tortures in store when François had taken him from the Trap–perhaps he would skin him

alive; the Indians and Half-breeds were so frightfully cruel to Animals. If only Carcajou, or Whisky-Jack, or dear old Mooswa could hear his whistle–surely they would help him out. Suddenly he heard the rustle of Jack's wings, and turned eagerly. A big, brown, belated leaf fluttered idly from a Cottonwood and fell in the snow. There was no Whisky-Jack in sight–nothing but the helpless, shrivelled leaf scurrying away before the wind.

At intervals he barked a call, then listened. How deadly silent the Forest was; his heart thumping against his ribs sounded like the beat of Partridge's wing-drums at the time of mating.

Strange fancies for an animal flitted through his mind–something like a man's thoughts when he drifts close to death. Why had Wiesahkechack, who was God of Man and Animals, arranged it this way. During all his life Black King had killed only when hunger forced him to it; but here was François, a Man, killing, killing always—killing everything. And for what? Not to eat; for the Breed had flour in plenty, and meat that was already killed. It was not because of hunger; but simply to steal their coats, that he or some other Man or Woman might look fine in fur-clothes stolen from the Boundary Dwellers–at the sacrifice of their lives.

Again Black Fox heard a leaf sawing its whispering way down through the willow wands: he even did not turn his head. But it was wings this time; and a cheery, astonished voice sang out: "Hello, Your Majesty, what are you doing there with your hands in the snow–feeling for a Mole's nest?"

"Praise to Wiesahkechack!" cried the King; "is that you, Jay? I'm trapped at last," he continued, "and you must fly like the wind and get some of our Comrades to help me out."

"There's a poor chance," said the Bird, despondently; "as you know, none of us can spring that big Trap but Muskwa, and we'll never get him out now–he is dead to the world."

"What am I to do?" moaned the King–"we must try something."

"Oh, we shall get you out of here. I'll call Beaver to cut the stake that holds the chain, and you'll just have to carry the Trap home with you. Carcajou might be strong enough to press down the spring, but his hands are so puffed up from the squeeze they got, he can't do a thing with them. Don't fret; I will soon get them all here, and we'll see what can be done."

In a wonderfully short time Jack had summoned Beaver, Mooswa, Blue Wolf, and Lynx. Mooswa's great heart was touched at the sight of their Sovereign's misery. "My services are of little use here," he said. "I will go back on the trail, close to the Shack, and watch for François."

"Sparrow Hawks!" exclaimed Jay; "I quite forgot about that. Our Friend was getting ready to come out on his Marten Road when I left. Somebody will

feel the foul breath of his Ironstick if we don't keep a sharp lookout."

"All the better if he brings it," answered Mooswa; "for then he'll follow me, and I'll lead him away so far that you'll have plenty of time to get our King home."

"Noble Comrade!" smirked Lynx; "such self-sacrifice! But don't you know that the Hunter will never give up your trail until you are dead? The snow is deep, the crust won't hold against your beautiful, sharp hoofs, and the Killer will run you down before the Sun sets twice."

"Most considerate *Traitor*!" snapped Whisky-Jack. "You would rather Black King fell into François's hands–wouldn't you?" For the Jay knew what Pisew had said to Carcajou when the latter was in the Trap.

"All right, Mooswa," growled Rof, admiringly; "you are a noble fellow. Go and lead François away–don't get within burning distance of his Firestick, though; I and my Pack will take care that the Man-enemy doesn't follow your trail after the closing of the light of day."

"I killed a Man once," answered Bull Moose; "but I'll never do it again, nor must you, Comrade. That is a thing to be settled amongst themselves–the Man-kill is not for us."

"I talk not of killing!" snarled Blue Wolf, surlily; "when our cry goes up, François will take the back-trail, and keep it till he is safe within the walls of his own Shack–that's what I mean."

"It is well!" affirmed the King, approvingly; "act thus, Comrades. We are not like Man, who slays for the sake of slaying, and calls it sport."

"Most generous Black King!" exclaimed Pisew, with an evil smirk.

Mooswa and Blue Wolf started off together. Umisk was driving his ivory chisels through the hard, dry Birch-stake that held the Trap. It was a slow job–almost like cutting metal.

Suddenly a thought struck Black Fox. "How am I to get home with this clumsy iron on my leg?" he asked. "Mooswa has gone, and there is no one to carry me."

"I could help you with the Trap," answered Umisk.

"And leave a trail to the house like a Rabbit-run? The Breed would find it, and murder the whole family; I'm not going to risk my Mother's skin in that manner."

"Thoughtful King!" lisped Pisew.

"True, true," confirmed Beaver. "François would surely find the trail. There is no other way, unless–unless–"

"Unless what, faithful Little Friend?"

"Unless you take the way of our People."

"And that way–Friend?"

"Cut off the leg!"

”Horrible!” ejaculated Lynx.

”Horrible for you, Frog-heart,” interposed Jack. ”The King is different–he’s got pluck.”

”Your Majesty will never get the Trap off,” continued Beaver, ”until Muskwa the Strong comes out in the Spring. Even if you did carry it home, your leg would go bad before that time.”

Black Fox pondered for a minute, weighing carefully the terrible alternative. On one hand was the risk of leading the Trapper to his carefully concealed home, and months of tortured idleness with the Trap on his leg; on the other the permanent crippling of himself by amputation.

”Can you cut the leg off, wise Umisk?” he asked.

”I did it once for my own Brother, who was caught,” Beaver answered, simply.

”Take off mine, then!” commanded the King, decisively; ”it is the only way.”

”You’ll bleed to death,” said Lynx, solicitously.

”Oh, that would be lovely!” sneered Jack; ”for then we’d all choose Pisew as his successor–’Le Roi est mort, vive le Roi!’ Excuse me, Comrades, that’s an expression François uses sometimes when he drinks Fire-water; it means, a live Slink is better than a dead Hero.”

When Black Fox gave the command to amputate his limb, Beaver ceased cutting the stake, scuttled over to a White Poplar, girdled the tree close to the ground, then, standing on his strong hind-legs, cut the bark again higher up. Next he peeled a strip, brought it over beside the Fox, and chiselled some of the white inner bark, chewing it to a pulp. ”Hold this in your mouth, Pisew, and keep it warm,” Beaver commanded, passing it to Lynx. ”We shall manage to stop the blood, I think.”

”You will poison our King,” said Jack, ”if you put that stuff on the wound after Slink has held it in his mouth.”

Beaver paid no attention, but stripped three little threads from the cloth-like tree-lining, and drew the fibre through his teeth to soften it. Then he spoke to the Bird: ”Come down here, Jack, and hold these threads–your beak should be as good as a needle at this job. Now for it, Your Majesty!” Umisk continued, and one might have fancied he was a celebrated surgeon rolling up his sleeves before going at a difficult amputation.

”This is horribly bitter stuff,” muttered Pisew–”it tastes like the Wolf-willow berry.”

”Good for the wound–will dry up the bleeding!” affirmed the little Doctor curtly.

”Is there anything the matter with this Bait, King–any White Death-powder?” he asked. ”If not, stick it in your mouth–it will brace you up, and

take your mind off the leg."

"There is no White Powder in it–I can guarantee that," snickered Jay. "I flew in the door yesterday when François and The Boy were out, stole the bottle off its roost, and dropped it through their water-hole in the river ice; just to save your life, Pisew, you know–you're such a silly Glutton you would eat anything."

"Jack," said the King, looking up gratefully, "your tongue is the worst part of you–your heart is all right."

"Even his tongue is all right now since he got over the fat Pork," sneered Pisew.

"Bird of Torture!" ejaculated Black King, "but that hurts, Umisk;" for Beaver had girdled the skin of the leg even as he had the bark of the tree.

"Think of the Meat in your mouth, King," advised Umisk. "Hold up this skin with your claw, Jack," he commanded. "There! pull it a little higher. I'll cut the bone here, you see; then we'll cover it with the skin-flap."

"Full-crop! but you have a great head, Umisk," cried Jack, admiringly.

"Wh-e-e! Wh-e-e-e-e!" squealed the Fox, crunching his sharp, white teeth to hold back the cries of pain.

"Quick, Pisew, hand out the Poplar-bread–it's off!" commanded Beaver. "Now, Jack, the thread. Hold one end in your beak, while I wrap it. There–let go! put a hole through the skin here!" Black King's tongue was lolling out with the pain, but with Jack's strong, sharp beak, Beaver's teeth-scalpel and deft fingers, the whole operation was completed in half an hour.

"What's that?" queried Black Fox suddenly, cocking his ears; "I heard the cough of François's Firestick–listen!"

"I heard it too," asserted Jack; "the Breed is after poor old Mooswa. If he kills our Comrade, Blue Wolf and his Pack will make short work of him."

"Now we are ready to take Your Majesty home. I think I've made a fairish job of it," said Umisk, holding up the shortened limb with great professional pride. "Bring the foot, Jack,–it must be buried. Pisew, you can carry the King, now that he is not loaded down with iron. There will be only your big-footed track to see; for I'll circle wide, double a few times, cross Long Lake under the ice, and our enemy will never know where I've gone."

"Leave the foot here," advised Jay; "the Breed will find it, see blood on the snow, discover Pisew's track leading away, and think Lynx has eaten Black Fox out of the Trap; knowing our friend's cannibal instincts, he'll believe this. That will give our Chief a chance to get well; for François, thinking he's dead, will not try again to catch him."

"I don't want my reputation ruined this way," whined Pisew.

"Ruin your reputation!" sneered the Bird. "That is rich! It's like Skunk complaining of a bad odour when you're about."

”You go with Pisew and Black King, Jack,” ordered Umisk, who had taken full management of the arrangements; ”better be off now before the cold-sting gets into the wound.” He helped Black Fox on Lynx’s back, and started them off; then struck out in a different direction himself.

The Red Widow’s first intimation of this great calamity was Jack’s thin voice calling for help to get Black Fox up into the Burrow. How the old lady wept. ”First it was little Cross-stripes, my Babe,” she moaned, caressing the King with her soft cheek; ”now it’s you, my beautiful Son. Poor Lad! you’ll never be able to run again.”

”Oh, yes I shall, Mother,” replied Black Fox. ”The leg will soon heal up, and I’ll manage all right. I’m only too thankful to be out of that horrible Trap.”

”Bless Umisk’s clever little heart!” cried the Widow in her gratitude, as she stroked the black head with her paw.

”Not forgetting a word for his sharp teeth, eh, good Dame?” remarked Jack.

”I’ll get food for the family,” added Black King’s younger Brother, proudly assuming the responsibility.

The Red Widow thanked Lynx and Whisky-Jack for bringing her wounded son home, and begged Pisew to walk back in his tracks a distance, and use every endeavour to cover up the trail leading to their burrow.

THE RUN OF THE WOLVES

After Mooswa left the others he walked to within two hundred yards of the Shack.

”Brother Rof,” he said to his Comrade, ”wait for me to-night at Pelican Portage–you and your Pack. If the Man follows me that far, I shall be tired by then, and need your help.”

”You’ll get it, old Friend–we’ll sing the Song of the Kill for this slayer of the Boundary People. There will be great sport to-night–rare sport. Ur-r-r-a-ah! but the Pups will learn somewhat of the Chase–by my love of a Long Run, they shall! Drink not, Mooswa, while you trail, for a water-logged stomach makes a dry throat!”

Just as Blue Wolf disappeared on his Pack-gathering errand, the Half-breed came out of his Shack. On his feet were snow-shoes; over his shoulder a bag, and in his hand a .45-75 Winchester rifle–he was ready for the Marten Road. Mooswa

started off through the Forest at a racking pace.

"By Goss!" exclaimed the Trapper, catching sight of the Bull Moose, "I miss me dat good c'ance for s'oot."

Throwing down his bag he started in pursuit, picking up Mooswa's big trail. The hoof-prints were like those of a five-year-old steer.

Out of sight the Moose stopped, turned sideways, and cocking his big heavy ears forward, listened intently. Yes, François was following; the shuffle of his snow-shoes over the snow was soft and low, like whispering wind through the harp branches of a dead Tamarack; but Mooswa could hear it–all his life he had been listening for just such music.

Wily as the Breed was, sometimes a twig would crack, sometimes the snow-crust crunch as he stepped over the white mound of a buried log. He had never seen a Moose act as this one did. Usually they raced at full speed for miles at first, tiring themselves out in the deep snow; while behind, never halting, never hesitating, followed the grim Hunter, skimming easily over the surface with his light-travelling snow-shoes–and the certainty that in the end he would overtake his victim. But this chase was on altogether new lines; something the Half-breed had never experienced. Mooswa kept just beyond range of his gun. A dozen times inside of the first hour François caught sight of the magnificent antlers. Once, exasperated by the tantalizing view of the giant Bull, he took a long-range chance-shot. That was the report Black King had heard.

When François came to the spot in which Mooswa had been standing, he examined the snow–there was no blood. "By Goss!" he muttered, "I t'ink some one put bad Medicine on me. P'raps dat Moose, he Debil Moose."

Hour after hour the hunter followed the Bull's trail; hour after hour Mooswa trotted, and walked, and rested, and doubled, and circled, just as it suited the game he was playing. François, like all Indians or Breeds, had no love for a long shot–ammunition was too precious to be wasted. He could wear the Moose down in two days, surely; then at twenty or thirty yards his gun would do the rest.

In the afternoon he tightened the loin-belt one hole–his stomach was getting empty; but that did not matter–he could travel better. If the fast lasted for three days it was of no moment; for when the Moose was slain and brought to the Shack by dog-train, the pot would boil night and day, and he would feast as long as he had fasted. The thought of the fat, butter-like nose of this misshapen Animal brought moisture to the parched lips of the long-striding Half-breed–that delicacy would soon be his. He travelled faster at the thought of it; also he must push his quarry to tire him, so the Moose would lie down and rest all night.

The dusk was beginning to settle down as Mooswa struck straight for Pelican Portage, though it was only four o'clock in the afternoon. Would Blue Wolf

be there to turn back the pursuer? If by any chance his comrade missed, what a weary struggle he would have next day with the blood-thirsty Breed ever on his trail. As Mooswa neared the Portage, a low, whimpering note caught his ear. Then another answered close by; and another, and another joined in, until the woods rang with a fierce chorus–it was the Wolf-pack's Call of the Killing:–

"Wh-i-m-m-p! Wh-i-i-m-m-p! buh-h! bu-h-h! buh-h-h! O-o-o-o-h-h! O-o-o-o-h-h! Bl-o-o-d! Bl-o-o-d!! Bl-o-o-o-o-d!!!" That was the Wolf-cry, sounding like silvery music in the ears of the tired Moose.

"Hungry, every one of them!" he muttered. "If François stumbles, or sleeps, or forgets the Man-look for a minute, Rof's Pack will slay him." Then he coughed asthmatically, and Blue Wolf bounded into the open, shaking his shaggy coat.

"Safe passage, Brothers, for Mooswa," he growled, with authority; "also no killing for the Hunt-man, for the hunt is of our doing."

François heard the Wolf-call too, and a chill struck his heart. Night was coming on, he was alone in the woods, and in front of him a Pack of hungry Wolves. Turning, he glided swiftly over the back-trail.

"The Kill-Call, Brothers," cried Rof, his sharp eyes seeing this movement of the fleeing Breed. Once again the death-bells of the forest, the Blood Song of Blue Wolf, rang out: "W-a-h-h-h! W-a-h-h-h! Gur-h-h-h! Yap! yap!! yap!!!" which is the snarl-fastening of teeth in flesh, the gurring choke of blood in the throat, and the satisfied note of victory.

The Hunter became the hunted, and into his throat crept the wild, unreasoning terror that Mooswa and every other living animal had known because of his desire for their lives. What would avail a rifle in the night against Blue Wolf's hungry Brethren? True, he could climb a tree–but only to freeze; the starlit sky would send down a steel-pointed frost that would soon bring on a death-sleep, and tumble him to the yellow fangs of the gray watchers.

Mile on mile the Half-breed fled, nursing his strength with a woodman's instinct. How useless, too, seemed the flight; those swift-rushing, merciless Wolves would overtake him as soon as the shadows had deepened into night. He had his Buffalo knife, and when they pressed too close, could build a fire; that might save him–it was a bare possibility.

With the thirst for Mooswa's blood upon him, his eager straining after the fleeing animal had been exhilaration; desire had nourished his stomach, and anticipated victory kept his throat moist: now the Death-fear turned the night-wind to a hot fire-blast; his lungs pumped and hammered for a cooling lotion; his heart pounded at the bone-ribs with a warning note for rest. The thews that had snapped with strong elasticity in the morning, now tugged and pulled with the ache of depression; going, he had chosen his path over the white carpet, coolly measuring the lie of each twig, and brush, and stump; now he travelled as one in a

thicket. Small skeleton Spruce-shoots, stripped of their bark by hungry Wapoos, and dried till every twig was like a lance, reached out and caught at his snow-shoes; drooping Spruce-boughs, low swinging with their weight of snow, caused him to double under or circle in his race against Blue Wolf's Pack.

All nature, animate and inanimate, was fighting for his life–eager for his blood. Even a sharp half-dead limb, sticking out from a Tamarack, cut him in the face, and sucked a few drops of the hot fluid. Startled into ejaculation, François panted huskily: "Holy Mudder, sabe me dis time. I give to de good Père Lacombe de big offerin' for de Mission." And all the time swinging along with far-reaching strides.

Memory-pictures of animals that had stood helplessly at bay before his merciless gun flashed through his mind. Once a Moose-mother had fronted him to defend her two calves–the big almond eyes of the heroic beast had pleaded for their lives. He had not understood it then; now, some way or another, it came back to him–they glared from the forest like avenging spirit eyes, as he toiled to leave that Wolf-call behind.

The Shack was still many miles away, for he had travelled far in the fulness of his seasoned strength in the Hunt-race of the daytime.

"I got me one c'ance," he muttered hoarsely. "S'pose I get too weak make fire, I dead, soor." A big Birch, in its heavy frieze-coat of white cloth, seemed to whisper, "*Just one chance!*"

Eagerly François tore its resin-oiled blanket from the tree, took a match from his firebag, snapped the sulphur end with his thumb-nail, for his clothes were saturated with fear-damp perspiration, and lighted the quick-blazing Birch. A clump of dead Red Willows furnished eager timber. How his sinewy arms wrenched them from their rotted roots. High he piled the defence beacon; the blaze shot up, and red-tinted the ghost forms of the silent trees.

Gray shadows circled the outer rim of blazing light–the Wolves were forming a living stockade about him. Blue Wolf placed the sentinels strategically. "Not too close, silly pups," he called warningly to two yearling grandsons; "the Fire-stick will scorch your sprouting mustaches if you poke your noses within reach. Remember, Comrades," he said to the older Wolves, "there is no Kill–only the Blood-fear for this Man."

The sparks fluttered waveringly skyward, like fire-flies at play; the Willows snapped and crackled like ice on a river when the water is falling. When the light blazed high the Wolves slunk back; when there was only a huge red glow of embers, they closed in again.

All night François toiled, never letting the rifle from his grasp. With one hand and his strong moccasined feet he crushed the dry, brittle Red Willows, and threw them on his life-guarding fire. No sleeping; a short-paced beat round

and round the safety-light, and almost incessantly on his trembling lips a crude, pleading prayer: ”Holy Mudder, dis time sabe François. I give de offerin’ plenty–also what de good Pries’ say, I hear me.”

[image]

”HOLY MUDDER, DIS TIME SABE FRANÇOIS.”

”Look at his face, Brothers,” growled Blue Wolf. ”Now thou hast seen the Man-fear. Is it not more terrible than the Death-look in the eyes of Buck? It is not well to kill Man, is it, Comrades?”

”No!” they admitted surlily–for they were hungry.

”Come,” said Rof, when the bitter cold dawn hour–colder than any of the others–warned them that the light was on its way, ”trot we back on Mooswa’s trail, and if the Man continues to his Burrow, then go we our path.”

When the light had grown stronger François peered about carefully.

”Blessed Virgin! Mos’ Holy ob Mudders! I t’ink me dat prayer you hear; dat wolves is gone soor. To de good Père Lacombe I give me big presen’ for de Mission. I keep me dat promise soor,” crossing himself fervently, in confirmation.

Blue Wolf was saying to the Pack as he trotted along at their head: ”Only for the promise to Mooswa the Hunt-man would have made a good meal for us, Brothers.”

”What are promises in the Hunger Year–the Seventh Year of the Wapoos?” cried a gaunt companion, stopping. ”Let us go back, and–”

Blue Wolf turned in a passion. ”First we fight!” he yelped, baring his huge fangs. ”I, who am leader here, and also am in the Council of the Boundaries, say the Man goes unharmed.”

The other dropped his bushy tail, moved sideways a few paces, and sat down meekly; swaying his head furtively from side to side, avoiding the battle-look in Blue Wolf’s eyes. Rof turned disdainfully, and trotted off on their back track; the Pack followed.

”I’ve saved this Man for Mooswa’s sake,” thought Blue Wolf.

”De prayer turn’ back dat wolves soor,” muttered the Breed, as hurrying on he reiterated his generous offering to the Mission. It was noon when he swung into the little log Shack, with something in his face which was not there before–something new that had come in one night. He did not want to talk about it; even to cease thinking of it were better; besides, what was the use of frightening The Boy.

”I no get dat Moose,” he said curtly, as he pulled his wet moccasins off, cut

some tobacco, mixed it with the Red Willow kinnikinick, filled his wooden pipe, and lying down in front of the fire-place smoked moodily.

The Boy busied himself getting a meal ready for his companion.

"By Goss! he big Moose," continued the Half-breed, after a time, when he had emptied the bowl of his pipe; "but I lose de trail las' night. S'pose he goin' too far t'ro de muskeg, I can' find him."

"Never mind, François," cried The Boy, "you'll get another chance at him before Winter's over. Come and eat, you must be hungry–the hot tea will make you forget."

"I s'pose somebody put bad medicine for me," grumbled the Breed, in a depressed monotone; "mus' be de ole Nokum at Lac La Bic'e. She's mad for me, but I don' do not'ing bad for her." But still nothing of his terrible experience with the Wolves. Why speak of it? Perhaps next day they would be fifty miles away.

After François had rested he said: "I mus' go see dat Trap for de Silver Fox; I t'ink me I catc' him dis time."

"Don't go out again to-day–you're too tired," pleaded Rod.

"Mus' go," replied the other. "S'pose dat Fox in de Trap, dat Debil Carcajou, or de Lynk, or some odder Animal, eat him; dere's no Rabbit now, an' dey's all starve."

"I'll go with you, then," exclaimed The Boy.

When they came to the Trap, François stared in amazement. It had been sprung.

The Breed examined the snow carefully.

"Jus' what I t'ink me. He's been catc', an' dat Lynk eat him all up. Only one foot lef'; see!" and he held up the amputated black paw. "Here's de big trail of de Lynk, too."

Dejectedly they went back to the Shack.

"Now I know it's de bad medicine," asserted François. "De Debil come in dat Moose for lead me away, an' I lose de Silver Fox what wort' two, t'ree hun'red dollar."

"The Lynx has had rather an extravagant blowout," remarked The Boy. "One could go to England, dine there in great shape, and back again for the price of his dinner." François did not answer. He was certainly running in bad luck.

"I t'ink me we pull out from dis S'ack," he said; "give up de Marten Road, an' move down to my ol' place at Hay Riber. Before, I keel plenty fur dere; here I get me not'ing, only plenty bad medicine."

"All right, François, I'm willing–anything you say," answered Rod.

"I got my ol' S'ack down dere," continued the Trapper, "an' we go for dat place. To-morrow we pick up de Trap. De Black Fox he's die, so I s'pose me we don't want stop here. I got give little Père Lacombe some presen' for de Mission,

an' mus' keel de fur for dat, soor."

CARCAJOU'S REVENGE

In the morning François and Roderick started with their dog-train to pick up Traps from the Marten Road.

"S'pose it's better w'at I go to de Lan'ing firs'," François remarked reflectively, as they plodded along behind the dogs and carry-all; "we don' got plenty Trap now, an' I can' find dat poison bottle. Yesterday I look, but he's gone soor; I put him on de s'elf, but he's not dere now. P'r'aps dat Whisky-Jack steal him, for he take de spoon some time; but anyway can' trap proper wit'out de poison."

After they had left the Shack Whisky-Jack cleaned up the scraps that had been thrown out from breakfast, and having his crop full, started through the woods looking for a chance of gossip. He observed Carcajou scuttling awkwardly along through the deep snow; this was the first time Jack had seen him since he had been liberated from the Trap.

"Hello!" cried the Jay; "able to be about again?"

"Who's at the Man-shack?" queried the other in answer, entirely ignoring Jack's personal gibe.

"Nobody," piped the Bird; "left me in charge and went out on their Marten Road."

"And the Dogs, O One-in-charge?" asked Carcajou.

"Gone too; are you out for a scrap with the Huskies, my bad-tempered Friend?"

"Were you sweet-tempered, gentle Bird, when you burnt your toes, and scorched your gizzard with the Man-Cub's fat pork?"

"Well, sore toes are enough to ruffle one, aren't they, Hunchback,–Crop-eared Stealer of Things?"

"And your Men Friends took the leg off our King," continued Wolverine, ignoring the other's taunt. "The Red Widow is close to an attack of rabies with all this worry."

"You're full of stale news," retorted Jay.

"If they are all away," declared Carcajou, "I'm going to have another peep at that chimney. Also there are three debts to be paid."

The Bird chuckled. "Generous Little Lieutenant! leave my account out.

But if you must go to the Shack, I'll keep watch and give you a call if I see them coming back."

"Fat-eating! but I hate climbing," grunted Wolverine, as he struggled up the over-reaching log-ends at one corner of the Shack. "If they had only left the door open–I never close the door of my Burrow."

He went down the chimney as though it were a ladder, his back braced against one side, and his strong curved claws holding in the dry mud of the other. Inside of the Shack he worked with exceeding diligence, deporting himself much after the manner of soldiers looting a King's palace.

Three bags of flour stood in a corner. "That's queer stuff," muttered Carcajou, ripping open the canvas. "Dry Eating!" and he scattered it with malignant fury. He pattered up and down in it, rolled in it, and generally had a pleasing, dusty time. The white stuff got in his throat and made him cough; the tickling developed a proper inebriate's thirst. Two zinc pails, full of water, sat on a wooden bench; the choking Animal perched on the edge of one, and tried to drink; but as he stooped over the spreading top his centre of gravity was disarranged somewhat, and his venture ended disastrously. The floor was clay, smooth-ironed by Francis's feet, so it held the fluid like a pot, and, incidentally, much batter of Wolverine's mixing was originated. He was still thirsty, and tried the other pail. That even did not last so long, for, as he was pulling himself up, somewhat out of temper, it tumbled heedlessly from the bench, and converted the Shack-floor into a white, alkaline-looking lake.

Then he puddled around in batter which clung to his short legs, and stuck to his toe-hairs, trying to get a drink from little pools, but only succeeding in getting something like liquid pancakes.

The stuff worked into his coat, and completely put to flight any feelings of restraint he might have had. A cyclone and an earthquake working arm in arm could not have more effectually disarranged the internal economy of François's residence.

Like most Half-breeds François played a concertina; and like most of his fellow tribesmen he hung up his things on the bed or floor. It was under the bed that Carcajou discovered the instrument, and when he had finished with it, it might have been put in paper boxes and sold as matches. Two feather pillows provided him with enthusiastic occupation for a time; mixed with batter the feathers entirely lost their elasticity, and refused to float about in the air. This puzzled the marauder–he couldn't understand it; for you see he knew nothing of specific gravity.

A jug of molasses was more rational–but it added to his thirst, also turned the white coat he had evolved from the flour-mixture into a dismal coffee colour.

Great Animals! but he was having a time. Whisky-Jack, from his post

outside, kept encouraging him from time to time, as the din of things moving rapidly in the interior came to his delighted ears. ”Bravo! What’s broken?” he screamed, when the pail met with its downfall. The blankets dried the floor a bit after industrious little Wolverine had hauled them up and down a few times. This evidently gave him satisfaction, for he worked most energetically.

Two sides of fat bacon reclined sleepily under the bed–a mouthful filled Carcajou with joy. Great Eating! but if he had that much food in his Burrow he needn’t do a stroke of work all Winter. He tried to carry a side up the chimney; and got started with it all right, for an iron bar had been built across the mud fire-place to hang pots on, which gave him a foothold; a little higher up he slipped, and clattered down, bacon and all, burning his feet in coals that lingered from the morning’s fire. The sight of disturbed cinders floating from the chimney-top intimated to Jack what had happened, and he whistled with joy.

This was an excuse for another round of demolition. ”If I could only open the Shack,” thought Wolverine. Though a dweller in caves, yet he knew which was the door, for over its ill-fitting threshold came a strong glint of light; also up and down its length ran two cracks through which came more light. Most certainly it was the door, he decided, sniffing at the fresh air that whistled through the openings.

Close by stood a box on end, holding a wash-bowl. Carcajou climbed up on this, and examined a little iron thing that seemed to bear on the subject. It was somewhat like a Trap; if he could spring this thing, perhaps it had something to do with opening the door. As he fumbled at it, suddenly the wind blew a big square hole in the Shack’s side; he had lifted the latch, only he didn’t know it was a latch, of course–it was like a Trap, something to be sprung, that was all.

”By all the Loons!” screamed Jay; ”now you’re all right–what’s inside? You have had your revenge, Carey, old Boy,” he added, as he caught sight of his coffee-coloured friend.

Carcajou paid no attention to his volatile Comrade, for he was busily engaged in gutting the place. ”My fingers are still sore from the Man’s Trap,” he muttered, ”but I think I can cache this Fat-eating.”

”François will trail you,” declared the Bird.

”He may do that,” admitted Wolverine, ”but he’ll not find the Eating. Has he a scent-nose of the Woods to see it through many covers of snow?”

”This is just lovely!” piped Jack, hopping about in the dough; ”it’s like the mud at White Clay River. Butter!” he screamed in delight, perching on the edge of a wooden firkin, off which his friend had knocked the top. ”I just love this stuff–it puts a gloss on one’s feathers. We are having our revenge, aren’t we, old Plaster-coat?”

”I am–Whe-e-e-cugh!” cried the fat little desperado, coughing much flour

from his clogged lungs.

”I say, Hunchback, wouldn’t you like to be a Man, and have all these things to eat, without the eternal worry of stealing them? I should–I’d be eating butter all the time;” and Jack drove his beak with great rapidity into the firkin’s yellow contents.

”I’ll return in a minute after I’ve cached this,” said Wolverine, as he backed out of the Shack dragging a big piece of bacon.

”Oh, my strong Friend of much Brain, please cache this wooden-thing of Yellow-eating for me,” pleaded Jay, when Carcajou reappeared. ”By the Year of Famine! but it’s delicious–it must be great for a Singer’s throat. Did I ever tell you how I was sold once at Wapiscaw over a bit of butter?”

”No, my guzzling Friend–nor would you now, if you didn’t want me to do a favour,” grunted the industrious toiler, rolling Whisky-Jack’s tub of butter off into the Forest.

”Well, it was this way–I saw a cake of this Yellow-eating in the Factor’s Shack; you know the square holes they leave for light–it was in one of those. I swooped down and tried to drive my beak into it–”

”Like the hot pork,” interrupted the tub-roller.

”Never mind, Carey, old Boy,–let by-gones be by-gones–I dove my beak fair at the Yellow Thing, and, would you believe it, nearly broke my neck against something hard which was between me and the Eating–I couldn’t see it, though.”

”Ha, ha, he-e-e-e-!” laughed Carcajou. ”You bone-headed Bird–that was glass–Man’s glass–they put it in those holes to keep the frost, Whisky-Jacks, and other evil things out–I know what it is. There! now your Yellow-eating is safe–François won’t find it,” he added, pushing snow against the log under which lay the hidden firkin. ”I wish you would fly and bring Rof and some of the other Fellows–tell them I’m giving a Feast-dance; make them hurry up, for the Men will be back before long.”

”Oh, Carey, they’ll guzzle my butter,” replied the Bird.

”They won’t find it. Tell the Red Widow to come and get a piece of this Fat-eating for the King. Fly like the wind. I’ll have everything out of the Shack, and you must tell Blue Wolf and the others to come and help me carry it to the Meeting Place.”

”Look here, Giver-of-the-Feast,” said Jack, struck by a new thought, ”what about The Boy? If you take all the food, he’ll starve before they get to the Landing for more. We must remember our promise to Mooswa.”

”That’s so,” replied Carcajou; ”I’ll leave enough Fish and Dry-eating to carry them out of the Boundaries; strange, though, that *you* should have thought of The Boy–hast forgotten the hot pork?”

”Neither have I forgotten my word to Mooswa,” said the Bird, as he flew

swiftly to summon the others to the feast.

Wolverine rounded up his day's work by caching the granite-ware dishes and rolling an iron pot down the bank, and into the water hole. At Carcajou's pot-latch there was rare hilarity.

"I'm proud of you, old Cunning," Blue Wolf said, patronizingly, as he sat with distended stomach licking the fat from his wire-haired mustache. "If anything should happen Black King, which Wiesahkechack forbid! we could not do better than make you our next Ruler. I have made a few good steals in my time, but never anything like this. To be able to give a Tea Dance of this sort! Ghur-r-r!" he gurgled in satisfaction, and rubbed his head and neck along Wolverine's plump side affectionately, as a dog caresses a man's leg.

"Not only wise, but so generous!" Lynx said, oilily, for he too had eaten of the salted fat. "To remember one's Friends in the Day of Plenty is truly noble; I shall never forget this kind invitation."

"Cheek!" muttered Jack, for he had not invited Pisew at all–had purposely left him out of the general call; but Lynx, always craftily suspicious, seeing a movement on among some of the Animals, had followed up and discovered the barbecue.

"I haven't eaten a meal like this since the year before the Big Fire," murmured the Red Widow, reminiscently. "Easy Catching! but the Birds were thick that year–and fat and lazy. 'Crouk, Crouk!' they'd say, when one walked politely with gentle tread amongst them, stretch their heads up, and patter a little out of the way with their short, feathered legs–actually not attempt to fly. But I never expect to see a year like that again," she sighed, regretfully. "Excuse me for mentioning it; but this fulness in my stomach has suggested the general condition of that time. The King will be delighted to have this nice, fat back-piece that I'm taking home to him. He did well to make you Lieutenant, Carcajou–you are a brainy Boundary Dweller. By my family crest, the White Spot at the end of my Tail, I'll never forget this kindness."

"Hear, hear!" cried Whisky-Jack; "you make the snub-nosed Robber blush. I had no idea how popular you were, Crop-ear. I've a notion to bring out the–Goodness!" he muttered to himself; "I nearly gave it away. Friendship is friendship, but butter is butter, and harder to get."

"Bring out what?" asked Pisew.

"The Castoreum, Prying-Cat," glibly answered Jay, cocking his head down and sticking out his tongue at Lynx.

"I remember the year you speak of, Good Widow; I also was fat that Fall," said Marten.

"So was I," declared Wuchak, the Fisher–"never had to climb a tree to get my dinner for months."

”It was the Fifth Year of the Wapoos,” enjoined Pisew, ”and we Animal Eaters were all fat. Why, my paw was the size of Panther’s–I took great pride in the trail I left.”

”Extraordinary taste!” remarked Jack, ”to feel proud of your big feet. Now, if in the Year of Plenty you had run a little to brain–”

”Never mind, Jack,” interrupted Blue Wolf, good-humouredly, for the feastfulness made him well disposed toward all creatures, ”we can’t all be as smart as you are, you know. Tired jaws! I believe I don’t care for any dessert,” he continued, sniffing superciliously at a rib-bone Wolverine pushed toward him. But he picked it up, broke it in two with one clamp of his vise-like teeth, and swallowed the knuckle end. ”Even if one is full,” he remarked, giving a little gulp as it hitched in his throat, ”a morsel of bone or something at the finish of the meal seems to top it off, and aids digestion.”

”I take mine just as it comes, bone and meat together,” declared Otter.

”So do I,” affirmed Mink, for they had been given a great ration of Fish as their share of the banquet. Carcajou had purloined it from the Shack with his other loot.

”I must say that I like fresh Fish better than dried,” declared Nekik to his companion, Mink; ”but with the streams almost frozen to the bottom, and the stupid Tail-swimmers buried in the mud, one cannot be too thankful for anything in the way of Eating. The wealthiest one in all the Boundaries is old Umisk, the Beaver; he’s got miles on miles of food that can’t run away from him.”

”Oh, I never could stand a vegetarian diet,” grunted Carcajou. ”I do eat Berries and Roots when Meat is scarce, but, taking it all round, you’ll find that the brainiest, cleverest, most active Fellows in the Boundaries are the Flesh-eaters. Look at old Mooswa–good enough Chap; big and strong, too, in a way, but Safe-trails! what can he do? Nothing but trot, trot, trot, and try to rustle that big head-gear of his through the bush. Did you ever see a Flesh-eater have to run around with a small horn-forest on his head in the way of protection? Never! they don’t run to horns–they run to brains.”

”And teeth,” added Blue Wolf, curling his upper lip and baring ivory fangs the length of a man’s finger to the admiring gaze of his friends.

”I eat Meat,” chirped Whisky-Jack, ”and I don’t run to horns or teeth either, so it must all go to brains, I suppose. Lucky for you fellows, too.”

”No, Wise Bird,” began Lynx, ”you don’t need horns or teeth to defend yourself; your tongue, like Sikak’s tail, keeps everybody away.”

”Let’s go home,” grunted Wolverine; ”I’m so full I can hardly walk.”

”I’ll give you a ride on my back, generous Benefactor,” smirked Pisew.

”He thinks you have cached some of the bacon,” sneered Jack; ”he’ll be full of gratitude while the pork lasts.”

Soon the Boundaries were silent, for full-stomached animals sleep well.

While there was feasting in the Boundaries there was much desolation in the Shack. François and The Boy had returned late to their wrecked home, and the Trapper's speech when he saw the débris, was something of wondrous entanglement, for an excited French Half-breed has a vocabulary all his own, and our friend was excited in the superlative degree. He knew it was Carcajou who had robbed him, for there were plaster casts of his brazen foot all over the mortar-like floor.

"We can't go to de new trap-place dis way," the Half-breed said; "we don' got no grub, de dis' he's gone, an' de poison, an' it jes' look like de Debil he's put bad Medicine on us himself. You stay here one week alone if I go me de Lan'ing?" he asked Rod. "I mus' get de flour, more bacon, some trap, an' de strykeen. I take me de dog-train for bring de grub stake. You jes' stop on de S'ack, an' when I come back we go down to Hay Riber."

It was late enough when François fell into a fitful troubled slumber, for the occasion demanded much recrimination against animals in general, and Carcajou in particular.

Whatever chance François might have had of discovering Carcajou's cache next morning, was that night utterly destroyed by a fall of snow.

PISEW STEALS THE BOY'S FOOD

In the morning, François, taking his loaded snake-whip, hammered the Huskie dogs into a submission sufficient to permit of their being harnessed; put a meagre ration for four days in the carryall, tied on his snow-shoes, and said to Roderick: "I go for pull out now, Boy; I s'pose t'ree day I make me de Lan'ing. I stop dere one day, hit de back-trail den, an' come de S'ack here wid de grub stake in fo'r more. You got grub lef for dat long, soor. Bes' not go far from de S'ack; de Blue Wolf he migh' come roun' dis side wit' hes Pack–bes' stick close de S'ack."

[image]

"I GO FOR PULL OUT NOW, BOY."

Then he slipped down the long-terraced river-bank with his train, and

started up the avenue of its broad bosom toward The Landing.

With rather a dreary feeling of lonesomeness Rod watched him disappear around the first long, Spruce-covered point, then went back into the Shack and whistled to keep the mercury of his spirits from congealing.

Other eyes had seen François wind around the first turn that shut him out from Rod's vision: Blue Wolf's eyes; the little bead eyes of Carcajou; the shifting, treacherous, cat-like orbs of Pisew, the Lynx. Mooswa's big almond eyes blinked solemnly from a thicket of willow that lined the river bank.

"I wonder if he'll bring the same Huskies back in his train?" said Blue Wolf, as they returned through the Boundaries together.

"I should think he would," ventured Mooswa.

"Don't know about that," continued Rof, "these Breeds have no affection for their Dogs, nor anything else but their own Man-Cubs. They do like them, I must say. Why, I've heard one of them, a big, rough Man he was too, cry every night for Moons because of the death of his Cub. He was as savage as any Wolf, though, for he killed another Man in a fight just at that time, and thought no more of it than I did over killing a Sheep at Lac La Biche. But every night he howled, and moaned, and whimpered for his lost Cub, just as a Mother Wolf might when her young are trapped, or stricken with the breath of the Firestick, or killed in a Pack-riot. Yes, they're queer, the Men," he mused in a low growl. "When François goes to The Landing, if one of the other Breeds stumps him for a trade, he'll swap off the whole Train."

"I'm sure he'll stick to Marsh Maid," declared Pisew; "she'll be back again all right, Brother Rof." Blue Wolf looked sheepishly at Mooswa. What a devil this Lynx was to read his thoughts like that.

"I hope nothing will happen François, for the sake of The Boy," wheezed Mooswa. "These Breed Men also forget everything when the fire-water, that makes them like mad Bulls, is in camp; it is always at The Landing too," he muttered, despondently. "When I was a Calf at the Fort, I heard the old Factor say–I think I've told you about that time–"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Carcajou impatiently, for he was a quick-thinking little Animal, "what did the Factor say about these Breed Men?"

"I'm coming to that," asserted Mooswa, ponderously. "It was at the time I was a Calf in the Fort Corral, and the Factor, who was my Boy's father, said that a Breed would sell his Soul for a gallon of this Devil-water that puts madness in their blood."

"What's a Soul?" asked Carcajou. "I wonder if I smashed François's in the Shack."

"I don't know," answered Mooswa; "it's something Man has, but which we haven't–it's the thing that looks out of their eyes and makes us all turn our heads

away. Even Rof there, who stands up against Cougar without flinching, drops his head when Man looks at him–is that not so, brave Comrade?"

"It is," answered Blue Wolf, dragging his tail a little.

"And a Breed will trade this thing for fire-water?" queried Carcajou.

"So the Factor said," answered the Moose.

"I wouldn't if I had it," declared Wolverine–"not even for the Fat-eating, and that is good for one. Was it that which made Wiesahkechack King of Men and Animals, and everything, when he was here–this Soul thing?" he asked pantingly, for the easy stride of his long-legged comrades made his lungs pump fast.

"I suppose so," replied Mooswa; "but if François gets fire-water at The Landing, I'm afraid it will be ill with The Boy. But, Comrades, you all remember your oath to me and the King, that for the Man-Cub shall be our help, and our care, and not the blood-feud that is against Man, because of his killing."

"I remember," cried Blue Wolf.

"And I," answered Pisew.

"I never forget anything," declared Carcajou. "When my paws ached because of François, I laid up hate against him; and when Black King's leg was lost because of this evil Man's Trap the hate grew stronger; but by the Bars on my Flanks do I bear not hate against The Boy, and bear the promise given to you, Mooswa."

"I'll carry you for a short trail, Lieutenant," said Blue Wolf, stopping beside Wolverine; "the Fat-eating has put new strength in my bones–jump up on my back. Your brains are nimbler than ours, but your short legs can't get over the deep snow so fast."

"Been to see him off, eh?" piped Whisky-Jack cheerily, fluttering up. "I heard him tell The Boy they'd go down to Hay River when he comes back from The Landing; but how did you Fellows know he was leaving this morning?"

"Rof got it from his Huskie sweetheart," said Lynx. "The Dogs were tied up last night, and the carryall outfit was lying ready at the door–that meant hitting the trail early this morning."

"Has the Man-Cub got Eating enough to last against François's return, Jack?" asked Bull Moose, solicitously.

"A dozen White Fish, a little flour, and some tea."

"That will keep the stomach-ache away, if the Breed comes back quickly," affirmed Mooswa.

Pisew cocked his Hair-plumed ears hungrily at the mention of Fish; and the thief-thought that was always in his heart kept whispering, "Fish! Fish! Fish that is in the Shack–The Boy's Fish!" The woods were so bare, too. It was the Seventh Year, the Famine Year, and a chance of eating came only at long intervals. Carcajou had robbed the Shack, and it had been accounted clever–all the Flesh

Eaters had feasted merrily off the loot. Why should he not also steal the twelve Fish? But he was not like Carcajou, a feast-giver, an Animal to make himself popular by great gifts; if he stole the Fish he would cache them, and the eating would round up his lean stomach.

"Carrier of Messages," began Mooswa, addressing Whisky-Jack, "thy part of the Oath Promise is watching over The Boy. If aught goes wrong, bring thou the news."

"Very well, old Sober-sides," answered Jay, saucily. "I'll come and sit on your horns that have so many beautiful roosts for me, and whisper each day into your ear, that is big enough to hold my nest, all that happens at the Shack!"

"He'll keep you busy, Mooswa," smirked Pisew.

"Mooswa has time to spare for his Friends," answered Jack, "because he eats an honest dinner. You, Bob-tail, are so busy with your thieving and lying-in-wait for somebody's children to eat, that you have no time for honest talk."

"Here's your path, Carcajou," cried Blue Wolf, stopping while Wolverine jumped down. "I'm going on to see how Black King is."

"Last night a strong wind laid many acres of Birch Trees on their backs, two hours' swift trot from here–I'm going there for my dinner," declared the Moose; "it will be fine feeding. It is a pity you Chaps aren't vegetarians; the Blood Fever must be awful–killing, killing, killing,–it's dreadful!" he wheezed, turning to the left and striding away through the forest.

"I'll go and see Black King too," exclaimed Whisky-Jack.

"I'm off to the muskeg to hunt Mice," announced Pisew; "the Famine Year brings one pretty low."

"Your Father must have been born in a Famine Year," suggested Jack, "and you inherited the depravity from him."

Lynx snarled disagreeably, and as he slunk cat-like through the woods, spat in contemptuous anger. "Jack has gone to the King's Burrow," he muttered; "I'll have a look at The Boy's Shack. I wonder where he keeps that Fish, and if he leaves the door open at all. Perhaps when he goes down to the river for water–ah, yes, Cubs and Kittens are all careless–even the Man-Cub will not be wise, I think. Now, so soon, the pittance of food I had from that thief, Carcajou, has melted in my stomach, and the walls are collapsing again. I wonder where the hump-backed Lieutenant cached the rest of his stolen Fat-eating."

Thus treacherously planning, Lynx stealthily circled to the Shack, lay down behind a Cottonwood log fifty feet away, and watched with a ravenous look in his big round eyes. Presently he saw Rod open the door, look across the waste of snow, stretch his arms over his head wearily, turn back into the Shack, reappear with two metal pails in one hand and an axe in the other, and pass from view over the steep river bank.

With a swift, noiseless rush the yellow-gray thief darted into the building. His keen nose pointed out the dried White Fish lying on a box in the corner. Stretching his jaws to their utmost width, he seized four or five and bounded into the thick bush with them. Two hundred paces from the clearing Pisew dropped his booty behind a fallen tree. ”I’ll have time for the others,” he snarled, pulling a white covering over the fish with his huge paw.

As he stole back again, a sound of ice-chopping came to his ears. ”Plenty of time,” he muttered, and once more his jaws were laden with The Boy’s provision. In his eagerness to take them all, two fish slipped to the floor; Pisew became frightened, and bolted with those he had in his mouth. ”I can’t go back any more,” he thought, as he rushed away; ”but I’ve done well, I’ve done very well.”

The Boy returned with the water, took his axe and cut some wood. He did not miss the fish. Pisew carried his stolen goods away and cached them.

That night Whisky-Jack, sitting on his perch under the extended end of the roof, heard something that gave him a start. Rod had discovered the loss of his Fish.

”My God! this is serious,” the Bird heard him say. ”Two fish and a handful of flour for ten days’ food–perhaps longer. This is terrible. It’s that Devil of the Woods, Carcajou, who has robbed me, I suppose–he stole the bacon before. If I only could get a chance at him with a rifle, I’d settle his thieving life.”

The misery in The Boy’s voice touched Whisky-Jack.

”Pisew has done this evil thing,” he chirped to himself. ”If he has, he has broken his oath of the Boy-care.”

THE PUNISHING OF PISEW

In the morning Whisky-Jack flew early to the home of Black King, and told him of the fish-stealing.

”Yes,” affirmed the Red Widow, ”it was Pisew. His father before him was a Traitor and a Thief; they were always a mean, low lot. And wasn’t this Man-Cub good and kind to my Babe, Stripes, when that brute of a Huskie Dog attacked him?”

”Yes, Good Dame,” affirmed the Bird; ”but for this Man-Cub your Pup would have lined the stomach of a Train Dog–now he may live to line the cloak of some Man-woman–that is, if François catches him. But what shall be done to this

breaker of Boundary Laws and Sneak-thief, Pisew, Your Majesty?"

"Summon Carcajou, Mooswa, Blue Wolf, and others of the Council, my good Messenger," commanded the King. "There is no fear of the trail now, for François is gone, and The Boy hunts not."

When they had gathered, Whisky-Jack again told of what had been done.

"It is Pisew, of a certainty," cried Carcajou.

"Yes, it is that Traitor," concurred Rof, with a growl.

"I could hardly believe any Animal capable of such meanness," sighed Bull Moose; "we must investigate. If it be true–"

"Yes, if it prove true!" snapped Carcajou.

"Uhr-r-r, if this thing be true–!" growled Blue Wolf, and there was a perceptible gleam of white as his lip curled with terrible emphasis.

"Go and look!" commanded Black King; "the snow tells no false tales; the Thief will have written with his feet that which his tongue will lie to conceal."

The vigilants proceeded to the scene of Pisew's greedy outrage. "I thought so," said Carcajou, examining the ground minutely.

"Here he hid the stuff," cried Rof, from behind a fallen tree. "That odour is Dried Fish; and this–bah! it's worse–it's the foul smell of our Castoreum-loving Friend, Pisew;" and he curled his nose disdainfully in the half-muffled tracks of the detested Cat.

"I can see his big foot-prints plainly," added Mooswa. "There is no question as to who is the thief. Let us go back and summon the Council of the Boundaries, and decide what is to be done with this Breaker of Oaths."

When they had returned to the King's burrow, he commanded that Umisk, Nekik, Wapistan, Mink, Skunk, Wapoos, and all others, should be gathered, so that judgment might be passed upon the traitor. "Also summon Pisew," he said to Jay.

When the Council members had arrived, Whisky-Jack came back with a report that Lynx could not be found.

"Guilt and a full stomach have caused him to travel far; it is easier to keep out of the way than to answer eyes that are asking questions," declared Blue Wolf, in a thick voice.

"Then we shall decide without him," cried Black King, angrily.

The evidence was put clearly before the Council by Rof, Carcajou, and Mooswa; besides, each of the animals swore solemnly by their different tail-marks, which is an oath not to be broken, that they had not done this thing.

"Well," said Black Fox, "we arranged before that, in case of a serious breach of the Law, the Council should decide by numbers whether any one must die because of the Law breaking. Is that not so?"

"It is," they all answered.

”Then what of Pisew, who has undoubtedly broken the Oath-promise that was made unto Mooswa?”

”He must die!” snarled Blue Wolf.

”He must cease to be!” echoed Carcajou.

”Yes, it is not right that he live!” declared Mooswa. And from Bull Moose down to Wapistan, all agreed that Pisew deserved death for his traitorous conduct.

”But how?” asked the King.

Nobody answered for a time. Killing, except because of hunger, was a new thing to them; no one wanted to have the slaying of Lynx upon his conscience–the role of executioner was undesirable.

”He shall die after the manner of his Father,–by the Snare, and by the means of Man, which is just,” announced Carcajou, presently.

”But François has gone, and the Man-Cub traps not,” objected the Red Widow.

”He did not trouble to take up the Snares, though, Good Dame,” affirmed Wolverine; ”I know of three.”

”You know of three, and didn’t spring them?” queried Jack, incredulously.

”There was no Bait–only the vile smelling Castoreum,” answered Carcajou, disdainfully. ”And there was also a chance that Pisew might poke his traitorous head through one–I guard not for that Sneak.”

”But how will you induce Pisew to thrust his worthless neck into the Snare?” asked Black King.

”There is some of the Fat-eating still left, Your Majesty,” returned Carcajou, ”and I’ll forfeit a piece as Bait.”

”That should tempt him,” asserted the King.

”But he may be a long time discovering it,” ventured Umisk, pointing out a seeming difficulty.

”Leave that to me,” pleaded Whisky-Jack; ”you provide the Bait, and I’ll provide the Thief who’ll try to steal it.”

It being settled that way, the Council adjourned, Carcajou and Whisky-Jack being selected as a Committee of Execution. Wolverine showed Jay where the snare was placed, and while he cleverly arranged the bacon beyond its quick-slipping noose, the latter scoured the Forests and muskegs for Pisew until he found him.

”Hello, Feather-Feet!” he hailed the Lynx with.

”Good-day, Gossip!” retorted Pisew.

”You’re looking well fed for this Year of Famine, my carnivorous Friend,” said Whisky-Jack, pleasantly.

”Yes, I’m fat because of much fasting,” answered Lynx. ”The memory of

Carcajou's Fat-eating alone keeps me alive; I'm starved–I'm as thin as a snow-shoe. It's days since my form would even cast a shadow–can you not see right through me, Eagle-eyed Bird?"

"I think I can," declared the Jay, meaning Lynx's methods, more than his thick-woolled body.

"I'm starving!" reasserted the Cat. "If Carcajou were half so generous as he pretends, he should give me another piece of that Fat-eating; it would save my life–really it would." He was pleading poverty with an exaggerated flourish, lest he be suspected of the ill-gotten wealth of Fish.

"Yes, Carcajou is a miser," affirmed Whisky-Jack. "He still has some of the Man's bacon cached."

"I wish I knew where," panted Lynx. "There is no wrong in stealing from a thief–is there, wise Bird?"

"I know where some of it is hidden," declared Jay, with an air of great satisfaction.

"Tell me," pleaded the other.

At first Jack refused utterly; then by diplomatic weakenings he succumbed to Pisew's eager solicitation, and veered around, consenting to point out some of Wolverine's stolen treasure.

"You are a true friend, Jack," asserted Pisew, encouragingly.

"To whom?" asked the Bird, pointedly.

"Oh, to me, of course; for Carcajou is a friend to nobody. But, Jack," he said suddenly, "you are fond of Yellow-eating, aren't you?"

"Yes, I like butter."

"Well, I'll tell you where you can get rare good picking–it's a good joke on Carcajou, too, though it was so badly covered up that I thought it more like a Man's cache."

The Jay started. Had this wily thief stolen his butter also–the butter that Carcajou had hidden for him at the Shack looting?

"You see," continued Lynx, "I stumbled upon it quite by accident as I was digging for Grubs, Beetles, and poor food of that sort–hardly enough to fill one's teeth. Oh, this Seventh Year is terrible! I was starving, Friend–really I was; the gaunt gnawing which never comes to you, and of which you know nothing, for you are always with the Men who have plenty, was in my stomach. I was thinking of the hunger-hardship, and of the great store of Fat-eating Carcajou must have cached, when I came upon this wooden-holder of stuff that is like yellow marrow."

"Butter," interrupted the Bird.

"I suppose so," whined Lynx.

"And you ate it?" queried Jack sharply, experiencing a sick feeling of desolation.

”There was only a little of it, only a little,” iterated Pisew, deprecatingly; ”hardly worth one’s trouble in tearing the cover from the wooden-thing.”

”The tub,” advised Jack.

”Probably; I’m not familiar with the names of Man’s things. But I just tasted it–that was all; just a little to oil my throat, and soothe the pain that was in my stomach. It is still there, really–under a big rotten log, where the water falls for the length of Panther’s spring over high rocks in Summer.”

”What’s there,–the tub?” queried Jack, incredulously.

”Also the yellow marrow–the butter,” affirmed Pisew.

”Oh!” exclaimed Whisky-Jack, drily. He knew the other was lying; if Pisew had found the tub he would have licked it clean as a washed platter. But the revenge he had in hand for this Prince of all Thieves was so complete that it was not worth while reviling him.

”Still I think you had better not touch Carcajou’s Fat-eating,” he advised.

Lynx laughed at this. Why shouldn’t he–he was so very hungry?

”Well,” said the Bird, ”mind I don’t wish to lead you to it–don’t ask you to go–in fact, I think you had better keep away; but Dumpty’s Fat-eating is hidden under the roots of that big up-turned Spruce, just where Mooswa’s trail crosses the Pelican on its way to his Moose-yard.”

”Do you really think it was hidden there by Carcajou?” asked Lynx. ”Is it not François’s cache–or some last year’s cache of another Man? They are always wandering about through the Boundaries, looking for the yellow dust that is washed down by running waters, or for the white metal that sleeps in rocks.”

”No, the white Meat belongs to our hump-backed Comrade–at least he rustled it from the Breed’s Shack,” answered Jay.

”Perhaps after all it would not be fair to take it, then,” whined Lynx. ”I am hungry–oh, so hungry, but to steal from one of our Comrades, even to save one’s life–I would rather die, I believe.”

”Prince of deceitful wretches!” muttered Jay to himself. ”Oh, the cant of it! now he means to steal it sure, but is afraid that I may inform against him.”

”I’ll not touch the Fat-eating,” continued Pisew. ”True, the Little Lieutenant stole it from François; but that is different, is it not, wise Brother–you who are learned in the Law of the Boundaries? To take from them who would rob us of our clothes is not wrong, is it?”

”No; that is understood by all of us,” answered Jack, aloud; to himself he said, ”the prating hypocrite!”

”So Carcajou is entitled by our law to half of the spoil, and I suppose that is the Fat-eating he has cached; the other half went in the love feast.”

”Yes.”

”Then I’ll not touch it–I will starve to death first,” and Pisew sat meekly on

his haunches and rolled his eyes sanctimoniously.

”I had no idea there was so much honourable observance of the law in your nature,” sneered Jack. ”In the Plenty Year we are all honest; but in this, the Season of Starvation, to be honourable and regardful of each other’s Eating is indeed noble. Will he swallow that?” queried the Jay to himself.

”Thank you, sayer-of-wise-words,” murmured Pisew. ”I always have been misunderstood–accused of the vilest things–even to the eating of Lodge-Builder’s Children.”

”Disgusting!” exclaimed Jack, smartly. ”They must be horrible eating, those young wearers of Castoreum.”

”No–they’re delicious!” interrupted Pisew, unwarily,–”I mean–I mean–they’re delightful little creatures,” he added, lamely.

”Well, I must be off, you-who-keep-the-fast,” declared Jack. ”I’m glad you have resisted the temptation, for I must admit that I was only trying you.”

”I thought so–I thought so!” snickered Lynx; ”and at first I joked to draw you on–pretended that I would do this disgraceful thing–take our most worthy Lieutenant’s store of Eating.”

”Now I must warn the Council,” thought Jack, as he flew swiftly through the forest, ”for Pisew will make straight for Carcajou’s bacon. Deceitful wretch! he deserves to be hanged. His death will save many a Fox-Cub, many a Kit-Beaver, and many a Bird’s egg.”

”Wise Bird, indeed!” sneered Lynx. ”I’ve deceived him. I’ll soon have Gulo the Glutton’s Fat-eating; and Whisky-Jack will bear witness to my honesty. They are all so wise; but Pisew, the despised, fares better than any one. No; nobody will know if I take it–not even the Devil-eyes of Carcajou will discover whose trail it is, for I will drag the Fat-eating, walking backwards, so it will look more like the trough-trail of Nekik, who slides on his belly through the deep snow. And Blue Wolf’s nose will discover only the scent of smoke-tainted meat, for it will come last over my tracks. Ha, ha!” he laughed disagreeably; ”we’ll see who lives through the Year of Distress by the aid of his brains.”

And while Pisew chuckled and made straight for the big Spruce where was hidden the bacon, Jack flew to the Council. To them the Bird said, ”Keep you all well hid in the bush close to the Bait; I will hide in the big tree which has a hollow, and when Pisew’s neck is in the noose will signal.”

* * * * *

With long springing lopes Lynx bounded close to where Mooswa’s road crossed the ice-bridge of the Pelican. Nearing it he walked steadily, making as little trail as possible.

”Yes, it is cached in there,” he muttered, spreading his broad nostrils, and filling them with the tantalizing perfume of bacon. ”Carcajou has also been to look at it this morning, for here are his tracks.”

He wasted little time investigating–there was no fear of a Trap, for it was not Man’s work; also he must not leave tell-tale tracks about; besides, it would not do to remain long in the vicinity for fear of being seen. Swiftly, stealthily, he slunk to the very spot, and pushed his round head through a little bush-opening that seemed designed by Carcajou to conceal his stolen Meat. Yes, it was there. Pisew seized the bacon hungrily and started to back out with his booty. As he did so there was the swishing rush of a straightening-up Birch-sapling, and something gripped him by the throat, carrying him off his feet. The startled Cat screamed, and wrenched violently at the snare as he scooted skyward. His contortions caused the strong cod-line which was about his neck to carry away from the swaying Birch, and he dropped back to earth, only to find himself fighting with a heavy stick which dangled at the other end of the line.

What a fiendish thing the snare-stick seemed to Pisew. It fought back–it jumped, and reeled, and struck him in the ribs, and tugged at the snare which was strangling him, and ran away from him, pulling the hot-cord tight about his throat with the strength of Muskwa; it was a Devil-stick surely–also would it kill him if no help came. The bacon fell from his mouth, and he tried to call for assistance, but only a queer, guzzling, half-choked gasp came from his clogged throat.

As if in answer to his muffled call he heard, faintly, a Bird-voice–it was Jack’s–would he help him? Lynx felt that he would not.

”He-e-e-p, he-e-e-p! qu-e-e-k, que-e-e-e-k! come one, come all,” cried Whisky-Jack.

Violently Lynx struggled. Tighter and tighter gathered the cord-noose, his own efforts drawing the death-circle closer. His fast-glazing eyes could just make out, in a shadowy way, the forms of gathering Comrades. He had been trapped–they were in at the death to witness the execution by his own hand. It did not last long. That merciless noose, ever tightening, ever closing in on the air pipes, was doing its work–drying up the lungs.

”It’s terrible!” Mooswa blurted out. ”He’s dead now–I’m glad of it.”

[image]

”IT’S TERRIBLE!” MOOSWA BLURTED OUT.

”Yes, he’s dead,” declared Carcajou, putting his short-eared head down to

Pisew's side, for well he knew the old Forest trick of shamming death to escape its reality.

"What of the carcass?" asked Mooswa; "shall I carry it far in the bowl of my horns? One of our Comrades, though he die the just death as declared by Law should not fall into the hands of the Hunt-men."

"Leave him," muttered Blue Wolf; "the Pack pass this trail to-night."

"How fares The Boy, Swift-flyer?" Mooswa asked of the Jay.

"Badly, great Bull, badly. One time he takes the two Fish this dead thief left,–unwillingly enough no doubt,–in his hand, and looks at them pitiably; takes the white Dry-eating–Flour, Men call it,–and decides of its weight: then with the little stick which makes a black mark he lines cross-trails on a board, and mutters about so many pounds of Eating for so many days, and always ends by saying: 'It can't be done–I shall starve.' Then he comes to the door and looks over the river trail which way went François, as though he too would pull out for The Landing."

"That he must not attempt," cried Mooswa, decidedly. "Turn your noses, Brothers, to the wind which comes from the big West-hills–moisten them first, so!" and a bluish-gray tongue damped the cushion bulk of his nostrils. All the Council pointed their heads up wind, and it smote raw in their questioning faces.

"Gh-u-r-r!" growled Blue Wolf, "I know; when comes this wind-wrath of the Mountains, Mooswa?"

"To-night, or to-morrow," answered the Bull.

"Then lie we close from the time the light fails this day until it is all over; each to his Burrow, each to his hollow tree, each to his thick bush," continued Rof. "François will not have reached The Landing yet, either. Dogs are not like Wolves–perhaps the blizzard will smother them."

"The Breed-man has the cunning of all Animals together," asserted Carcajou. "He will choose a good shelter under a cut-bank, even perhaps put the fire-medicine to the dry-wood, then all together, as Brothers, he and the Dogs will lie huddled like a Fox Pack, and though the wrath howl for three days none of their lives will go out." The deep-thinking little Wolverine knew that Rof was fretting, not for François, but because of Marsh Maid.

"But the Man-Cub is not like that," declared Bull Moose, "and if he starts, good Jay, do thou fly quickly and bring us tidings. Rof, thou and thy Pack must turn him in the trail."

"We will," assented Blue Wolf. "All this trouble because of that carrion!" and he threw snow over the dead body of Lynx disdainfully with his powerful

hind-feet.

THE CARING FOR THE BOY

Whatever Rod's intentions might have been about following on after François, their carrying out was utterly destroyed by the terrific blizzard which started that night. All the next day, and the night after, no living thing stirred from its nest or burrow.

Whisky-Jack cowered in the lee-side shelter of the roof; and inside, Roderick listened to the howling and sobbing of the storm-demons that rocked the rude Shack like a cradle. Even through the moss-chinked, mud-plastered log-cracks the fine steel-dust of the ice-hard snow drove. It was like emery in its minute fierceness.

Spirit voices called to Rod from the moaning Forest; his imagination pictured the weird storm-sounds as the voice of his friend pleading for help. Many times he threw the big wooden door-bar from its place, and peered out into the dark as the angry wind pushed against him with fretful swing. Each time he was sure he heard his Comrade's voice, or the howl of train-dogs; but there was nothing; only the blinding, driving, frozen hail–fine and sharp-cutting as the grit of a sandstone. Once he thought the call of a rifle struck on his ear–it was the crash of an uprooted tree, almost deadened by the torturing wind-noises.

The cold crept into his marrow. All night he kept the fire going, and by dawn his supply of wood had dwindled to nothing; he must have more, or perish. Just outside in the yard François had left a pile of dry Poplar. Almost choked by the snow-powdered air, Rod laboured with his axe to cut enough for the day. At intervals he worked, from time to time thawing out his numbed muscles by the fire-place. "One trip more," he muttered, throwing down an armful in the Shack, "and I'll have enough to last until to-morrow–by that time the storm will have ceased, I hope."

But on that last short journey a terrible thing happened. Blinded by the white-veil of blizzard Rod swayed as he brought the axe down, and the sharp steel buried in his moccasined foot. "O God!" The Boy cried, in despairing agony. He hobbled into the Shack, threw the wooden bar into place, tore up a cotton shirt, and from the crude medicine knowledge he had acquired from François, soaked a plug of tobacco, separated the leaves, and putting them next the cut, bound the

torn cloth tightly about his foot.

That night the storm still raged, and his wound brought a delirium pain which made his fancies even more realistic. Whisky-Jack heard him moaning and talking to strange people.

Next morning a cold sun came up on a still, tired atmosphere. The fierce blizzard had sucked all life out of the air: the Spruces' long arms, worn out with swaying and battling, hung asleep in the dead calm: a whisper might have been heard a mile away.

At the first glint of light Jack spread his wings, and, travelling fast to the home of Black Fox, told of Rod's helpless condition. "Before it was the hunger-death that threatened; now the frost-sleep will come surely, for he cannot walk, only crawl on his hands and knees like a Bear-Cub," said Jay Bird, with a world of pity in his voice.

"Call Mooswa and Carcajou," cried the Red Widow, "The Boy is in their keeping."

When Wolverine had come he said: "There is still a piece of Fat-eating cached, if I can find it under this mountain of white-fur that covers the breast of The Boundaries."

"That is well, good Comrade," declared Black King; "but how shall we get it to the hands of our Man-Cub?"

"Place it in the bowl of my horns," said Mooswa, "and I will lay it at his door."

"Yet the Fat-eating may be on one side of the wooden gate, and The Boy starve on the other," remarked Whisky-Jack, thoughtfully.

"I will knock with my horns, and The Boy will open the gate thinking it is François."

"Even with a full stomach he may perish from the frost-death," continued Jack; "for now he cannot cut wood for his chimney–though the fire still lives, for I saw its blue breath above the roof as I came away."

"Call Umisk," ordered Black King; "he is a wood-cutter."

"Excellent, excellent!" sneezed Carcajou, in a wheezy voice, for the blizzard had set a cold on his lungs. "If Chisel-tooth will cut fire-wood I'll drop it down the chimney, and The Boy may yet be kept alive until François returns. Come with me, Daddy Long-legs," he continued, addressing Mooswa, "and we'll have a look for that cached Fat-eating in this wilderness of white-frosted water."

After a tiresome search they found the bacon that had been hidden by the little hunchback. Mooswa carried it to the Shack, dropping it at the door, against which there was a great drifted snow-bank; then he rubbed his horns gently up and down the boards.

"Is that you, François?" cried a voice that trembled with gladness, from

inside the Shack. There was a fumbling at the door, and the next instant it was pulled open.

Mooswa almost cried at sight of the pain-pinched, ghost-like face that confronted him, and The Boy recoiled with a look of dismay–the huge head frightened him. Then catching sight of the bacon, he looked from it to the Bull-Moose questioningly; all at once an idea came to him.

"You are hungry too, Mr. Moose, are you?" for he remembered stories of severe storms having driven deer and other wild animals to the haunts of Man for food. Evidently the smell of bacon had attracted the Moose; but where in the world had it come from? Had it been left by some chance on the roof, and knocked off by the strong blizzard wind? That seemed a likely solution. The Moose was so unafraid, too–it was curious! He reached out and pulled in the bacon–it was like the manna shower.

"Poor old Chap!" he said, stretching out a hand and patting the big fat nose timidly; "you've come to a bad place for food. There's nothing here you can eat."

[image]

"POOR OLD CHAP!"

Mooswa stuck out his rough tongue, and caressed the wrist. Rod scratched the Bull's forehead in return, and they were friends.

The big eyes of Mooswa wandered about the bare pathetic interior. It was a poor enough place for a crippled Boy–but what could be done. "I wish I could speak to him," he thought, rubbing his massive face against the flannel shirt reassuringly. Then he turned and walked solemnly through the little clearing, and disappeared in the thick wood.

The bacon put new heart in Roderick.

A rational explanation of this advent of the pork appeared to be that it had fallen from the roof; but all through that night of distress The Boy had muttered broken little prayers, just as he had done for years at his mother's knee, and whether it had actually fallen from the roof or from the skies was not the real issue, for he was convinced that it had come in answer to his prayers.

The pain crept up his leg, up his back, and, as the hours dragged on, the dreary, lonesome hours, it mounted to his brain, and the queer fancies of approaching delirium carried him to a fairy land peopled by unreal things. He had just sanity enough to keep the chimney fire going, but his little pile of wood dwindled until the last stick was placed on the coals. When in the afternoon Carcajou dropped three billets that Umisk had cut down the chimney, Roderick laughed.

He was a King in delirium-land, and when he wanted anything all he had to do was pray, and the angels would send it.

Sometimes the sticks of wood rolled out on the floor as they clattered down–these The Boy put to one side.

"I suppose the angels won't come in the night," he whispered; then laughed. It was a grotesque idea, but the fire was kept blazing.

He had no rational thought of eating; when he felt hunger-pains he fried a little of the bacon and ate it. Sometimes he made a batter of flour and water, cooking the mixture in a frying-pan over the fire–turning out an almost impossible kind of pancake.

"He acts like Wapoos in the early Spring," Whisky-Jack told Mooswa: "laughs, and whistles, and cries, and sobs; but he eats, which is a good thing, and is also warm. I never thought that crop-eared Hunchback, Carcajou, had goodness enough in him to do anything for anybody."

"He's like yourself, Whisky-Jack, a bit of a th–sharp-tongued fellow, I mean" (thief, he was going to say, but checked himself just in time), "and full of queer tricks, but good-hearted enough when a Comrade is in trouble. How long will the Fat-eating, which is the food of you Meat-eaters, last The Boy?" Mooswa asked.

"Perhaps three days."

"Also, is it good food for the sick–is it not too strong? When I am not well there are certain plants that agree with me, and others I cannot touch."

"Fish would be better," declared Jack, with the air of a consulting physician.

"I thought so," said Mooswa. "The smell of that bacon at the door almost turned my stomach. If the Man-Cub could only eat sweet Birch-tips, or dried Moose-flower–it's delicious when well preserved under deep snow. Even unrotted moss would be better for him than that evil-scented Meat."

The Bird laughed, "He, he, he! fancy the Man-Cub chewing a great cud of mushy grass. Now Fish, as I have said, would be just the thing; there's nothing lies so sweet on one's stomach, unless it's Butter. Warm Roostings! but I wish that cat-faced Pisew had been hanged before he found my cache."

"Jack," continued Moose, "you might ask Nekik or Sakwasew to catch a Fish for The Boy; they are all bound by the promise to help take care of him."

"All right," said Jay. "Otter might do it, for he's a generous Chap, but Sakwasew is a greedy little snip, I think. I never knew a Mink yet that wasn't selfish."

"I don't know how long we shall have to look after this Man-Cub," Mooswa said, when he, and Rof, and Black King talked the matter over that evening. "François is a good Trapper, we all know that to our sorrow, and he likes The Boy, for he was years with his Father, the Factor, as servant to the Company, but still he's a Breed, and if there's any fire-water at The Landing it is hard to say

when he may get back; besides, the breath of the mountain that shrivelled us all for two days may have got into his heart."

"My Pack hunts for three days in the far Boundaries," muttered Blue Wolf.

"Why?" asked the King, sharply.

"In three days I will tell Your Majesty," answered Rof, shutting his jaws with a snap.

"Well, well," exclaimed Black Fox, "in the Year of Starvation there is no preserve. We hunt where we find, and eat where we catch; and only the Kit-law and the Cub-law, and the Seventh Year Law of the Wapoos is binding."

Blue Wolf disappeared for three days; and for three days Umisk cut wood for The Boy, and Carcajou dropped it down the chimney. Mooswa went every day and rubbed his horns against the door. The coming of his Moose friend was also a part of the angel care the wounded boy had dreamed into his life. His eager joy at even this companionship was pitiable; but it was something to look forward to–something to pull him back out of the deeper levels of delirium-world.

Nekik, the Otter, caught a fish, at Mooswa's request, and Carcajou dropped it down the chimney.

"It will burn," objected Umisk, who was cutting wood.

"Then The Boy will find it with his nose," answered Carcajou.

After that Roderick asked the angels to bring him fish–it was better than bacon. They were queer angels, Nekik and Carcajou, but the sick lad got a fish every day.

On the third day Blue Wolf returned. "I found one of the Men-kind down the river," he announced to Mooswa and Black Fox; "he is trapping alone, I think."

"Well," queried Black King, "what of that?" for he did not quite understand.

"If we could get him to The Boy I thought it might be well," answered Blue Wolf.

"Ah! I see," cried the King. "That's why the Pack hunted for three days in the far Boundaries."

Wolf growled a deprecating objection.

"How far away is he?" asked Mooswa.

"Six hours of the Chase-lope," answered Blue Wolf.

"I could bring him, even as I led François away when you were not desirous of his company, Your Majesty," said the Moose.

"It's a dangerous game," muttered Black Fox. "I don't like it–one can't judge the strike of their Firesticks; and you're such a big mark–like the side of a Man's Shack."

"I saw The Boy's leg to-day," continued Mooswa, "and it's bigger, with this wound-poison, than my nose. Unless he gets help soon, he will die."

"François should be back in a day or two," declared the King.

”François is a Breed,” asserted Mooswa; ”and days are like the little sticks the Breed-men use when they play cards–something to gamble with.”

”The Pack could be ready if the Man pressed too close as you led him to our Man-Cub,” suggested Rof.

”I do not fear him the first day,” continued Mooswa; ”Man’s speed is always the same and I can judge of it; it is the second day, when I am tired from the deep snow, that a little rest, too long drawn out, or a misjudged circle with one of the followers travelling wide of my trail, that may cause me to come within reach of their Firestick.”

”Well, you might not reach Red Stone Brook in one day,” asserted Blue Wolf; ”so perchance you may need help the second. You’ll find the Man just below Big Rapids.”

”I’ll start to-night,” said Mooswa, ”for The Boy must get help from his own kind soon. He is sick of the wounded leg–also of a half-filled stomach; but then there is another illness that neither I nor any of us can understand. Perhaps it is of that thing the Factor said Men had and would sell for the evil fire-water–the soul. One time the eyes of The Boy are all right, even as yours, Rof, or mine, seeing the things that are; and then a look comes in them that is like the darkening of a purple Moose-flower when the sunlight is suddenly chased away by a cloud. Then this Boy, that is a Man-Cub, talks to his Mother, and his Sister, and calls to the things he names Angels, up on the roof; though I know not what they may be, because it is only little humpbacked Carcajou dropping wood down the chimney. Yes, that’s what it must be,” Mooswa continued, reflectively, ”the sickness of this Soul-thing the Men-kind have, for The Boy laughs, and cries, and his eyes blaze, and look soft like one’s young, and flood with tears, and glare hot and dry. Yes, he must have help from his own kind, for we know not of this thing.

”With good fortune I may lead this Man to him by the coming of darkness the first day; if not, then Blue Wolf will stand guard on my trail the second.”

”Yes, even the first day, also, will I be near,” asserted Rof.

FRANÇOIS AT THE LANDING

As Mooswa tramped down the wide roadbed of frozen river, François, up at The Landing, was doing very much as the Bull Moose had feared.

He had weathered the blizzard, lying huddled up with his dogs in the shel-

ter of a cut-bank, not daring to stir even for food till the fury of the icy blast had passed. He had even come to The Landing with a full resolve to go back immediately after he had secured his outfit; alas! for the carrying out of it, he was but an easily influenced Half-breed. At The Landing were several of his own kind down from Little Slave Lake with the first kill of Winter fur. With these the possession of money or goods always meant an opportunity for gambling.

François had a "debt credit" at the Hudson's Bay Company's store equal to the value of his needs; any Trapper who has kept his slate clean in the Company's accounts can usually get credit for a small outfit.

When the Half-breed had completed his purchase, the Factor tossed him a large plug of smoking tobacco, which was the usual terminal act of a deal in goods in any of the Company's posts.

François filled his pipe, sat down by the hot box-stove with its roaring fire of dry Poplar-wood, and smoked, and spat, and dilated upon the severity of the blizzard, and regaled the other occupants of the Trading Post with stories of Wolverine's depredations. Suddenly he ceased speaking, held the pipe in his hand hesitatingly, and straightened his head up in a listening attitude. The deep, sonorous, monotonous "tum-tum, tum-tum, tum-tum" of a gambling outfit's drum-music came sleepily to his acute listening ear. It was like a blast from the huntsman's horn to a fox-hound; it tingled in his blood, and sent a longing creeping through his veins.

"There goes that Nichie outfit from Slave Lake again," cried the Factor, angrily. "They've gambled for three nights; if the police were here I'd have a stop put to it."

François tried to close his ears to the coaxing, throbbing, skin-covered tambourine the gambling party's music-maker was hammering that still, frosty night; but his hearing only became acuter, for it centred more and more on the thing he was trying to keep from his mind. Even the "Huh, huh!–huh, huh!–huh, huh!–huh, huh!" of the half-dozen Indians who sat about a blazing camp-fire, and rocked their bodies and swayed their arms in rhythmic time, came to him with malevolent fascination.

"I t'ink me I go sleep," François said, knocking the ashes from his pipe, and putting it in his bead-worked deerskin fire-bag.

"You'd better pull out sharp in the morning," commanded the Factor; "young McGregor will be running short of grub before you get back."

"I roun' up ever' t'ing to-night," returned François, "an' hit de trail firs' t'ing in de mornin', soor. I make me de S'ack in t'ree day."

Outside, the "Tum-tum" called to him; the "Huh, huh!" pleaded with him like the voice of a siren. He would go and sit by their fire just for a little, the Breed reasoned–not play! for more than once he had been stripped to his very

shirt when luck set against him. True, other times he had accumulated furs, and dogs, and guns, even the caribou-skin coats, and Cow-boy hats–fine valuable hats worth ten dollars a piece,–when fortune smiled and he had guessed unerringly in which hand his opponent-player had hidden the cartridge shell, or whatever other token they used.

"Huh-huh! François! Huh, Boy–Welcome!" went round the circle of squatting figures when the Half-breed stood amongst them. The musician stopped beating his instrument; solemnly each player and onlooker held out a hand and gave François one sharp jerk of greeting. Two rows of men sat facing each other, a big blanket over their knees; room was made for the new arrival.

"S'pose I not gamble to-night me," said François, hesitatingly.

They laughed in astonishment–doubtingly.

"S'pose you 'fraid you lose, Man-who-saves-his-money," cried a Saltaux Indian, disdainfully.

Now a Breed or an Indian must not be accused of being afraid of anything; if he be, and submit to it, he is undone for all time. Half their bravery is due to this same moral cowardice. François hesitated, and the others, ignoring him, drew the blanket over their knees; the player secreted the tokens, and drawing forth his hands crossed his arms, always waving them in rhythmic time to the tum-tum. Then the Man-who-guesses in the opposite party indicated with his fingers where he thought the tokens were hidden.

It wasn't in human blood to stand out against this thing–not generations of gambler blood, and François cried, half fiercely: "Make room, Brothers! We'll see who's afraid."

That was the beginning. In the end, which came toward daylight, François had neither grub-stake, nor rifle, nor train-dogs. Time after time he took in exchange for some asset a little bundle of Red-willow counter sticks; time after time the little sticks, some long and some short, dwindled until they were all gone. The evil fate that had been his down at the trapping stuck to him in gambling.

Broken, and half numbed by loss of sleep and a sense of impending disaster, brought on by his despoiled condition, François crawled off to a friend's tepee, laid down like a train-dog, and fell asleep.

MOOSWA BRINGS HELP TO THE BOY

Mile after mile Mooswa cut from the head-trail with his easy-swinging rack, the strong crust of frozen snow giving his great limbs free play.

The open bed of the river held just such a run as he liked: no tree branches to catch his huge horns, no fallen tree giving cover to a stalking Panther or strange Wolf Pack; and, as if to make his trip perfect, he was running up a North Wind. He was like a telegraph operator sitting at his clicking instrument with the wires telling him everything.

"A brother Moose crossed here, just a hundred yards ahead," the Wind whispered one time. "Wh-f-f-f-! it was a Bull, too," the scent-wind told his delicate nostrils. "Ugh-wh-e-e-e-f-f-! Sikak has crossed the trail here, and killed the strongest scent left by any other–disgusting little brute!" This message Mooswa took from the wind, and repeated to himself. For a mile his nostrils were simply stricken dumb by the foul odour; his nose told him nothing of other affairs.

Then for a matter of ten miles there was but the sweet breath of Spruce as the wind filtered through a long point covered with it. "Line clear," the frosty air signalled, as Mooswa, taking a straight course for the merging of dark green and river-white, raced eagerly.

At the "Second Rapid," where the float-ice had grounded on rock-boulders in the Autumn closing-time, the river bosom humped like a corduroy road. "I must remember this spot on my coming back," Mooswa muttered, as he picked his way more slowly over the troubled ice-road. "Here I can make a big run if enemies are close," he added as a stretch of many miles reached away, level as a mill pond.

"Wolves! the Gray Hunters! the Murder Brothers who go in packs!" he said, as his quick-feeling nose picked their presence from the North Wind. "Not Rof's Pack," he continued, sampling the scent a little finer–"Strangers!" and he watched warily, cocking his ears forward for a warning whimper.

"Huh! they're busy!" for as he flashed over their cross-trail there arose the fainter odour of Caribou. "Safe journey, cousin," he muttered, "and confusion to the Throat-cutters. It's the Meat-eating, the Blood-drinking," he philosophized, "that breeds all the enmity in the Boundaries. There are Grasses, and Leaves, and Flowers enough for all, and no encroachment, if we'd only stick to it; but eating one's Comrades is what makes the trouble."

Just before daylight Mooswa stopped, climbed up a sloping bank warily, and ate a light breakfast; then slipped back to the river-bed, huddled up in the lee of a clay-cut, and after resting for two hours pushed on again. Another ten miles and he stopped like a flash, holding his head straight up wind, the coarse, strong-growing hairs over his withers vibrating with intensity. "Sniff! sniff! Dogs! Man! Rof said nothing of Dogs. This makes it more complicated. It is the scent of White Men, and the Dog-smell is not that of Huskies. These Whites

sometimes bring the long-legged creatures that follow us like Wolves."

He worked cautiously down the river till his eyes caught sight of a blue smoke-feather floating lazily upward.

Five or six short steps at a time, three or four yards he moved,–then stopped and watched with eyes, ears, nose, and all his full sensibility. He knew the Man-trick of a flank movement–he must get them out on the river behind him; besides, there was now the stronger, more certain odour of Dogs.

He was perhaps a matter of half a mile from the little Shack above which twisted the spiral curl of smoke, when a fierce, strong-throated "Yap! yap! Whe-e-e, yap!" cut the frosty air.

"I thought so," Mooswa muttered. "I know that breed–the fierce-fanged ones the Scotch Factor had at Fort Resolution–from his own Boundaries across the sea they came. They are like the Men themselves–on, on, rush and hold. Deep-chested, small-gutted as Caribou; with long legs that carry them over the snow like those of my own family; gray-haired and strong-jawed, like Blue Wolf: but weak in the feet–small-footed, with hair between their toes which balls up in the snow and makes them go lame." Then Mooswa considered the task he had undertaken.

"If the Man slips the Dogs, and the snow keeps hard and dry, there will be more fighting than running," he said to himself, "for these brutes will come faster than I care to go. But there is a strong crust, strong enough to bear me, and if the sun warms the snow so that it will ball in the haired toes, then I'll have a chance in the run. The Man moves," he continued, whiffing at the air. "Two of them!" he muttered, as their forms outlined against the morning sky; "Rof brought tidings of but one. Now for it! I'm coming, Boy!"

He turned and walked slowly back on his track, breaking into a shuffling trot farther on.

In a few minutes the two men, snow-shoe clad, rifle in hand, and cartridge-belted, reappeared circling through the woods on the bank. With one of them were four Scotch Stag-hounds in leash. Mooswa's eyes took in the situation as he trotted, carrying his head a little to one side. "The flank movement," he muttered, "and a stolen shot at the next bend–they'll not slip the Dogs while they have hope of a shot."

When the first river-bank point hid him from their sight he raced. "They're running now," he thought, for he was down wind from them, and the telegraph was working.

When the two hunters reached the belly of the next bend they saw a big Bull Moose quietly browsing at the point beyond. He was walking slowly, snipping at the tree branches as he moved.

"Keep the dogs back," one hunter said; "we are sure to get a quiet shot at

him, for he's on the feed."

Point after point, bend succeeding bend, Mooswa played this game; mile after mile they toiled, the tantalizing expectation of a stolen shot leading them an amazing distance on the Moose trail.

"It's the Stag-hounds that keep him moving," remarked the man who had spoken before; "he's down wind, and gets them in his big, fat nose–if I could rustle a shot into his carcass, I'd slip them quick enough; but if we let them go now it will be a play of twenty or thirty miles before we get another sight of him. I'm not struck on following a Bull Moose under full trot with a pack of dogs behind him."

"We'll get a shot on the quiet soon," remarked his comrade. "He is a bit on edge just now, but will settle down after he has seen us a few times." They had given up travelling in the bush, and were following straight on the hoof-marks in the river-bed.

"Hello!" sang out one, pointing to a depression in the snow, "he's been lying down resting here–he's getting fagged. Somebody else must have been running him before we struck his trail–he's nearly beat."

As they crossed the Wolf trail Mooswa had found on his way down, the Trapper in the lead said, significantly, "It's the Gray Hunters have done the Bull up; they've been after him, and he's dead beat."

The big Stag-hounds sniffed the Wolf trail, dropped their long, bony tails in sullen fear, raised their heads, and bayed a howling note of defiance.

"Shut up, Bruce!" exclaimed one of the men, pulling at the raw-hide leash, "you'll be better up against a Moose than tackling that gang."

Now the mark in the snow had been made by Mooswa just to draw the hunters on; he wasn't tired, for the hard crust held him up, and he could have kept that gait for two days.

They had travelled probably thirty miles when the leader said, "Better slip the dogs, Mac, this Moose is putting up a game on us; he's as cunning as an old fox, and we'll lose him to-night, I'm afraid."

When the straps were unbuckled the Scotch hounds broke into a chorus of delight: "Yi, yi, yi, yi! yap! yap! yi, yi! Bah-h-h! Bah-h-h!" stretched their long limbs and raced on the Bull Moose's trail. That showed a strain of Collie blood in their veins, for if they had been pure bred they would have run silent, and by sight only.

"Pleasant greeting that," muttered Mooswa, as his flanks lengthened out in a terrific pacing gait.

"We're coming–we're coming! yi, yi!" sang the Stag-hounds, their heads low to the snow; their lean flanks stretching out until they seemed like something shot from a catapult. But swift as they were, Mooswa was swifter. They

were running at high pressure, straining every nerve, using every ounce of speed that was in their wire-haired bodies; the Bull was running with a little in hand–something in reserve. ”They will upset everything,” he thought. ”Those blood thirsters will chase me on past the Shack, and the Men may never see it.”

At the Second Rapid, with its tortuous ice-humps, the Bull lost a little ground–he had to go slower. The dogs, quicker of foot, and able to turn sharper, gained on him. Each time they caught sight of their prey they gave a savage yelp of eager exultation, and ran with heads high–ran by the eye.

”Sing, gaunt Brothers!” said Mooswa; ”on the level you’ll have to run with your bellies closer to the trail to keep your advantage.”

Well clear of the Rapid ice, the Bull again swung his awkward-looking body forward with increased pace. Suddenly a hoof crashed through the crust almost bringing him on his nose; before he had gone a hundred yards this happened again. Fringed by giant Spruce, tall banks on either side had stood as barrier between the fierce biting frost-wind and snow crust; also the day’s hot sun was beginning to rot its brittle shell. Oftener and oftener it broke under the racing Moose; the lighter dogs ran freely over its treacherous surface. The Bull looked over his shoulder at his pursuers; they were gaining–he could see that. ”Six points more to the Shack,” he muttered, as he rounded a low-reaching headland that turned the river wide in its snake-like course. Animals count river distances as do the Indians, so many land points from one place to another; Mooswa’s six points were a good ten miles.

Each time he floundered in the deep Snow his swift-running enemies gained at least a dozen yards.

”I wish Blue Wolf were here,” thought Mooswa; ”I’ll never make the Shack. I’ll try a Boundary Call.” He stretched his throat, and called, ”Wha-a-a–i-i-n-g,” which is not unlike the cry of a Rook. The hounds answered with an ironical yell; but another sound struck the runner’s ear, very faint, and very far ahead; it was the Help-call of The Boundaries–Blue Wolf’s voice.

”Good old Rof!” cried the Moose, as he shot forward with revived strength.

The hounds were now running by sight, head up all the time. Every few minutes Mooswa repeated his signal–each time it was answered ahead, stronger and closer; and behind him the eager yap! of the pursuers was drawing nearer. ”There’ll be more fighting than running presently,” he thought; ”it’s just as well–if Rof has the Pack, it won’t take long to settle these hungry Hunters.”

Rounding the next bend a clear stretch of two miles lay straight away, and at the farther end of it his trained eye discovered three moving specks. Behind him, not thirty yards back, raced the dogs.

”It will be a battle,” he muttered; ”four against four–four of the Boundaries in the Starvation Year, against four Fish-fed Dwellers in Man’s camp.”

Another mile and the foremost dog was snapping at the Bull's hocks, just falling short each jump; but Blue Wolf and his comrades were only a stone's-throw off.

As Mooswa and his pursuers neared the great, gaunt, blue-coated Wolf, the latter crouched–chest, and neck, and jaw flat on the snow; behind, well spread in rigid leverage, were the strong, gnarled legs. A length off two younger wolves waited ready for battle, flat-lying as their leader. Mooswa understood. As he slashed by Blue Wolf, almost touching him, the close-following Stag-hound sprang for his quarters, all but dragging him to earth; but the fangs failed to hold, tearing a gash down Moose's thigh, and as the Dog fell sideways a pair of jaws, strong as a bear-trap, closed on his lean throat.

"Hold fast, Brother!" wheezed Mooswa, swinging around in his own length, and making a vicious sword-cut at the hound's back with his iron hoof. A second dog sprang at the Bull's throat, only to strike the big antlers quickly lowered to guard it.

Rof's two sons had closed with the other hounds, and a battle to the death raged. There was not much noise, only a snarling sucking from where Blue Wolf's fangs were fastened in the throat of the hound he had pinned down.

Once Mooswa got a clean slash at his fighting dog with a fore-foot that laid the brute's shoulder open; once the dog fastened in Mooswa's throat as the treacherous crust gave way and threw him off his guard. It seemed anybody's battle. Blue Wolf knew better than to let go the first hold he had taken. It was said in the Boundaries that long ago, two or three generations back, a Bull-dog had mated with one of his ancestors, and the strong strain had more than held its own–the way of the Bull-dog, which is to catch and hold, against the way of the Wolf, which is to cut and jump, cut and jump. Certain it is that Rof fought as no other Wolf ever did–except his two Sons, holding and sucking, and working his jaws saw-like, as an Otter-hound does, more and more into the grip. But the Stag-hound had a well-fed strength which stood him in good stead. Over and over the two rolled; the hound's jaws fastened on one of Blue Wolf's fore-legs, close to the paw. The bone had been broken long ago–chewed into splinters, and the pain was terrific; but if Blue Wolf had the tenacity of the Bull-dog strain, he also had the wild wisdom of the Wolf brain, and he knew that to let go meant death.

Once something swept the hound sideways with terrific force from over the top of Rof, almost breaking the dog's back; that was a little side help from the shovel-horns of Bull Moose. Up to that time it had been all hoarse growls from the strong-fighting animals, for the advantage had lain not much on either side. Suddenly a "Wh-u-f-f! ki-yi-yi-yi–wh-e-e-e, yi-i-i," dying into a piercing treble, went up. Mooswa was grinding his dog into the snow-crust with his hundred-

pound antlers. A lucky pass with a fore-foot had brought the hound down, and before he could recover, Mooswa had thrown the weight of his fighting charge upon him, and was cutting his steel-gray body into fragments.

There was still hot work to be done, for one of the young Wolves had been overcome, stretched out with a broken neck, and the released dog was helping his comrade pull down the other. They were both at him when Mooswa charged. Once, twice, three times, as a trip-hammer hits hot iron, the heart-shaped hoofs, knife-like on the edges, smote the dogs, for they were taken unawares; then, as before, his horns made the work complete.

As Mooswa straightened himself a little staggeringly, for his throat was badly torn, there were only two left fighting; all the rest were dead–the two sons of Blue Wolf, and the three Stag-hounds.

"Thanks, Brother," said Blue Wolf, rising on weak legs, as a deft, dragging blow from Moose's right arm laid open the hound's stomach, and finished the work Rof's fast-tiring strength was hardly equal to. "Very neatly done–I could almost fancy it was a rip from Muskwa's paw. My two Lads are done for," he whined piteously, looking at the gaunt, gray bodies stretched out on the white snow, all splashed crimson with red wine from their veins. "Wolf-blood and Dog-blood–it scents much alike," he said, turning his head away, as he sat on his haunches holding up a broken leg. Drip, drip-drip, drip, little red drops ate their hot way into the snow from Bull-Moose's neck.

"That is a nasty slash, Mooswa," sympathized Blue Wolf, looking at his companion's wound.

"We twig-feeders have strong gullets," answered the Bull, "else it had been worse. There's nothing torn, for I still breathe through my nose; but for many a day you'll hunt on three legs because of me, Comrade."

"I suppose so," moaned Blue Wolf, regretfully, licking nervously at his crushed paw. "I'll mate well with Black King. But it is all in the life of the Pack, and not your fault; no one takes blame to himself who calls when his life is at bay. Where go you, Brother–how far back are the Hunters?"

Mooswa straightened his head sharp into the wind–it still held steady from the North. "Their scent comes from the second point, and we must trail again; the Firestick is not like a Dog–it bites beyond reach. Get in my horns, Rof, and I'll carry you."

"No," said Blue Wolf, decidedly; "each takes his own hurt to his Burrow–that is the way of the Pack; each to himself in the fight–one down is all on top. Besides, Comrade, your long legs are knocking together in weariness; the snow drinks much of your red blood."

"Come," called Mooswa, "the Man-scent turns the first point."

Blue Wolf, whining piteously, was rubbing his red-stained jowl up the neck

of one of his dead Sons. He turned, balanced himself unsteadily, and tried to kick snow over their dead bodies. Bull-Moose, seeing this, lowered his head, gave three or four mighty scrapes with his wide horns, and piled great white mounds over Blue Wolf's dead children.

"Come away now," he commanded again; "the Hunt-men sight us–they are racing."

"They'll have a fair trail to follow for a little," answered Wolf; "then it will be dark, and we'll lose them. I go to the Pack for safety; had I known of the Dogs and this other Man I should have brought more than two Cub-wolves."

"I go to the Shack," said Mooswa, shortening his steps to keep pace with Wolf.

"To be killed by the Hunt-men?"

"I don't know; I go to The Boy."

As they climbed the bank, "Bang! pin-g-g-g!" sang a leaden messenger, fairly whistling through the crotches of Mooswa's horns.

"The Firestick!" he grunted; "sight of his dead Train-dogs has angered the Hunt-man. Slip off to your Pack now," he continued, as they trailed through the little clearing surrounding the Shack. "Get Umisk to fix up your foot as he did Black King's."

"And you?" queried Blue Wolf.

"I stop here!" the other answered, swaying as he stood in his tracks for a second.

"Come with me," pleaded Rof; "my Pack shall turn back the Hunters."

"Here they come–off to the Woods!" Mooswa answered, going himself to the Shack door and rattling his horns against the boards. The noise wakened Whisky-Jack, who had curled up for his night's sleep under the eave.

"Thieves!–Hello, Mooswa!" he piped, craning his neck around the corner, and seeing the big horned head.

Inside a faint querulous voice asked impatiently, "Is that you, François, or is it the angels with wood? If it is, throw it down the chimney, please–I'm too sick to get up."

Mooswa "whuffed," blowing the wind through his blood-coated nostrils with a sound The Boy knew, and scraped his horn up and down the door again. There was a muffled, slipping noise of some one crawling to the door. The bar dropped, Mooswa pushed it gently open, staggered in, and plumped down exhausted on the floor.

Carcajou had heaped the fire-place well with wood for the night–dry Tamarack to make it blaze, and green Poplar to make it last; the bright light shone on Mooswa's blood-matted body and revealed to Roderick his terrible condition.

"Mooswa, Mooswa!" he cried, dragging himself close and putting his arm

around the big nose, ”who has done this? You are wounded.” Just then two men, with the blood-thirst of the chase hot in their hearts, glided to the door on snow-shoes. One had thrust forward a rifle, but his companion knocked it up with his arm. ”What would you shoot?” he asked.

”I don’t know,” answered the other, his Winchester almost falling from shaking fingers, as he caught sight of a small boy-figure huddled against the animal’s head. ”Is it a banshee, Donald?” he continued, in a frightened, husky whisper.

”Is that you, François?” cried Rod, sitting up in his eagerness, as the voices came to him from the outer dusk.

”Great Powers!” exclaimed the man Donald, stepping through the door, ”that’s Factor McGregor’s kid, Rod. I heard he was down here somewhere trapping with that Breed, François. What’s the matter, Laddie?” the thick Scotch voice burred.

”Well, I’m hanged if I ever outspanned anything like this,” said the other man; ”it’s like that thing we used to read, ’Babes in the Woods.’”

”Where’s your mate–François?” asked Donald again. ”And what’s the matter with you–scurvy?”

”François,” answered the Boy hesitatingly, for days of wound-fever had clouded his young brain,–”François? oh, yes, I remember–he went to The Landing long ago.”

”And left a kid like that here alone!” cried Donald’s companion.

”What’s the matter with your leg–scurvy?” asked the leader again.

”My leg? yes, it’s sore–awfully sore. Sometimes I dream that it’s another person, and I talk to it.”

”What’s the matter with it?” the man reiterated huskily, pulling the roll of a fur cap down over his eyes to hide something, for the little, pale, pinched face, backed by a mass of yellow knotted hair, made him feel queer.

”My leg? oh, yes–yes, there was so much snow, and I slipped, and the axe cut it.”

”Better get in the blankets, Laddie;” and standing his rifle against the wall Donald reached down with his strong arms to lift up Roderick.

The little fellow shrank away, and clasped the Moose’s head closer. Mooswa’s big ears were flipping back and forth nervously; he knew that something was being settled, and lay still, waiting.

”Come, Laddie,” said the big man again, coaxingly, ”don’t be afraid; don’t you remember me?–I worked for your daddy, old Factor McGregor, at Fort Resolution–Donald Bain is my name.”

The small pinched face looked up at him. ”I’m not afraid, but you’ll hurt Mooswa; you’ve shot him now–see the blood. He’s been taking care of me.”

Donald Bain straightened himself up and looked at his comrade. His companion understood, and nodded encouragingly.

"No, Laddie, I'll give you the word of a Scotchman that we'll not harm him. God's truth! in the old land if one's enemy came hard pressed to the house for shelter it would be a blackguard that would injure him, or give him away. Get in the blankets, now, Laddie, and we'll take care of both you and the Moose."

The presence of friends, and a cup of hot tea which they brewed him, soothed The Boy, and he became quite rational.

"This is the queerest thing I ever saw in my life," said Donald Bain. "I've heard of a hunted fox, close run, taking refuge in a house, but this Moose staggering into the Shack is very extraordinary. Who kept the fire going and fed you, McGregor?" he asked.

"Oh, I prayed every night, and in the day too, and the Angels came and dropped wood down the chimney, and fish, and bacon."

Donald's companion tapped his forehead significantly, and, turning his face away, stalked over to the fire and poked it vigorously.

"Mooswa came every day," added The Boy. "He's the Moose Father used to have at the Fort–I didn't know him at first, and was afraid."

"Oh, ho-o-o!" exclaimed the big man, ending with a distinct whistle. "I remember him. He took to the bush when he was a two-year-old. That accounts for his coming to the Shack–he couldn't quite shake off the civilization he got. Here, Dave," he continued, addressing the other man, "get a pail of water, and give the wounded beast a drink."

"He's killed four of the best hounds ever came to the North-west," Dave remonstrated, looking at Mooswa.

"So would you, man, if you could, when they tried to pull you down. It was a fair fight, and not of his seeking either."

The Boy also pleaded for Mooswa.

"Now, we've got to get young McGregor to The Landing just as quick as we can," declared Donald Bain, as he examined The Boy's limb. "Look at the size of it–it'll be a case of blood-poisoning, I'm afeerd."

"How will you manage it?" queried Dave, sullenly. "This brute has killed our dogs–will you carry him on your shoulders?"

"That's so," mused Donald, taking off his cap, and scratching the thick grizzled hair; "I suppose we'll have to rig up a carryall, and pull him ourselves."

"You want to go to The Landing?" asked Roderick.

"We don't want to–" commenced Donald, but checked himself, and added, "yes, me and Dave must go up for more dogs, and some baccy," fabricating with chivalrous ingenuity, to reassure the sick boy. "We was thinking you'd better go along too; there's no dog-train, but me and Dave could track you up on a small

jumper–does there happen to be one about?"

"I think Mooswa would drag the sleigh–he used to at the Fort," suggested Rod.

"By the Great Wallace!" exclaimed Bain, slapping his thigh, "that he will–if he's not grown too wild. Hitched to a sled, he could run clean away from a dog-train, in the old days."

"He's been harnessed right enough, some time or another," declared Dave. "Here are two white-haired spots on his back–that means saddle-galls. Gracious! he's as quiet as an old horse."

They put in a busy evening, the two men, bathing The Boy's leg, and with a sailor's needle they found in his outfit sealing up the torn wounds in Mooswa's neck. He never moved, just looked on stolidly. He knew they meant him no harm. Any animal can tell from the touch of a man's finger, or the look in his eye, whether it's war or kindness.

Whisky-Jack had been intensely interested in all this–the clatter and noise kept even his bird eyes open. "Wonderful doings!" he exclaimed; "the Boundaries are being turned into a regular Sun-dance–but I'm glad I saw it all. The Boy will be all right now–*Good old Mooswa!*" He flopped about drunkenly outside, for his eyes were not quite like Owl's, and the different lights bothered him.

Then he fired a word of encouragement at Mooswa. "Stick to The Boy, old Dainty-head-gear; you're Big Buck of the Boundaries–I'll tell Black King and all the fellows so. Stupid light this–fancy they'll get on without me now," and scrambling up to the eave he stuck his head under wing and went fast asleep.

In the morning a carryall was made, a rude harness constructed from shaganappi, Trap-chains, and straps, and before noon they were on their way to The Landing; Mooswa submitting to be hitched up with patient gentleness.

Whisky-Jack grinned when he saw the Moose decked out in these trappings. "Now you're a dandy, my fine fellow," he said, patronizingly. "We'll never see you again. Remember me to François when you see him, and tell him not to hurry back–Good-bye, good old Mooswa."

"I guess our Shack and things will be all right till we get back," said Donald. "At any rate, Factor McGregor's kid has first call, I reckon. I'd like to put a bullet through that Breed, though."

"What if the Moose bolts?" asked Dave. "Here's a tracking-line they used on their canoe,–suppose we take a hitch on his horns or his nose with it; we could stop him if he tried to get away."

"Yes," answered Donald, "and if we can't, if the worst comes to the worst, we can drop him with a bullet before any harm's done."

But they need not have bothered their heads about the line, for Mooswa knew just what was being done; he was taking his Boy to the land of good care.

Like an old cart-horse, he plodded along. The snow was frost-hardened again, and the going was good.

In three days they arrived at The Landing. François was just ready to start with a new outfit the Factor had given him debt for. Then for days he had to hide from Donald Bain, for there was sheer murder in the big Scotchman's heart.

[image]

IN THREE DAYS THEY ARRIVED AT THE LANDING

The day after their arrival Mooswa disappeared. When he got back to his comrades he found that Whisky-Jack had told them everything, and next to Black King he was the greatest hero in the Boundaries.

The Factor sent Roderick in to Edmonton with his own team, and nursing soon put him right.

When he told about the angels feeding him, and keeping his fire going, the people listened a little awe-stricken, for they saw that he believed it firmly. Also the two Hunters asserted that the fire was burning brightly when they came. Perhaps after all it was the angels.

* * * * * * * *

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